

“Bad and Dangerous Work”: Lessons from Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth-Century Oxford Archives



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RÉSUMÉ Depuis les années 1860, des collèges de l'Université Oxford ont invité des spécialistes externes à faire cataloguer leurs titres de propriété. En examinant comment ont été classées et décrites les archives de huit collèges entre 1860 et 1930, en les comparant avec le *Manuel* néerlandais et celui de Jenkinson, tous les deux parus durant cette période, et en examinant aussi le travail de catalogage effectué à l'Université Oxford au XVIII^e siècle, cet article montre comment la préoccupation de rendre les documents d'archives non seulement accessibles mais aussi disponibles instantanément a encouragé les archivistes à ignorer la provenance des documents, à disperser des fonds d'archives et à organiser les documents selon la chronologie ou le sujet, plutôt que de respecter l'ordre original. Comme conséquence, les archivistes ont traité les documents dont ils avaient la garde comme pièces isolées, favorisant ainsi le contenu plutôt que le contexte. Cet article considère aussi nos propres attitudes envers la gestion des documents d'archives aujourd'hui, en donnant un bref aperçu des politiques gouvernementales, de la théorie archivistique et des développements récents en ligne afin de conclure, qu'encore une fois, nous plaçons l'accent uniquement sur l'accès tout en ignorant la provenance. Enfin, l'article examine plusieurs catalogues disponibles en ligne afin d'explorer si nous aussi, tout comme nos prédécesseurs des XIX^e et XX^e siècles, nous nous exposons au risque de privilégier le contenu plutôt que le contexte.

ABSTRACT From the 1860s, Oxford colleges invited external scholars to catalogue their muniments. By looking at how eight colleges' archives were arranged and described between 1860 and 1930, and by comparing them with the Dutch *Manual* and Jenkinson's *Manual*, both published in this period, together with some earlier cataloguing work from eighteenth-century Oxford, this paper will show that a preoccupation not only with making the archives accessible but also with making particular records instantly available encouraged the archivists to ignore the provenance of records, breaking up fonds and organizing them according to chronology and subject matter rather than maintaining their original order. The consequence was that they treated the records in their care as discrete items, thus prejudicing content over context. The essay will also consider our own attitudes to archival management today, using a brief overview of government policies, archival theory, and online developments to suggest that, once again, we are concentrating solely on access and ignoring provenance. Finally, it will examine several online catalogues to explore whether, like

our late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century forebears, we too are in danger of putting content before context.

Though the history of archives is gathering increasing attention, there has been little interest in analyzing the cataloguing practices of earlier archivists in the light of what lessons, good or bad, we today can learn from their work.¹ This paper is based on a case study of the catalogues compiled circa 1860–1930 for the archives of eight colleges in the University of Oxford.² Oxford University is an unusually rich source both of archives and of early archive catalogues thanks to the presence of its colleges, all semi-autonomous institutions, each with its own traditions and sets of archives, which offer useful sources of comparison.³ Table 1 sets out the colleges and archivists examined:

Table 1: Oxford Colleges and Archivists

NAME OF ARCHIVIST	COLLEGE	DATE OF WORK
William Macray	Magdalen	1864–78
Charles Trice Martin	All Souls	1874–77
George Parker	Balliol	1877–89
Charles Shadwell	Oriel	c. 1880–1905
W.H. Stevenson	Merton	1888–1890s
Herbert Hurst	Brasenose	1898–1911
Noel Denholm-Young	Queen’s, Christ Church, and Magdalen	1920s–1930s

- 1 Our use of the term “cataloguing” encompasses both arrangement (including physical as well as intellectual arrangement of records) and description (in the making of a finding aid). We regard arrangement and description to be two parts of one process. We discuss both throughout, though we always make it clear whether we are referring to a finding aid or the records themselves.
- 2 We are grateful to the following archivists and librarians for discussing their archives and catalogues with us: Norma Aubertin-Potter and Gaye Morgan (All Souls), Anna Sander (Balliol), Elizabeth Boardman (Brasenose), Judith Curthoys (Christ Church), Julian Reid (Merton), and Robert Petre (Oriel).
- 3 We have explored some of them in Robin Darwall-Smith and Michael Riordan, “Archives for Administrators or Archives for Antiquarians? A History of Archive Cataloguing in Four Oxford Colleges,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 30, no. 1 (April 2009): 93–115, and in Michael Riordan, “Printing, Selection and the Cataloguing of Oxford Archives, c. 1850–1950,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 32, no. 1 (April 2011): 51–62.

These eight colleges form a representative sample: for instance, Balliol is one of Oxford's three thirteenth-century foundations, while Christ Church was founded in 1546; and whereas Balliol was for many years one of Oxford's smallest colleges, Christ Church was its largest; and the size of each college's archive inevitably reflects its comparative age and wealth.

Although each college developed its own idiosyncratic administrative traditions and recordkeeping habits, nevertheless all Oxford college archives do contain certain similar types of records. There are records about their estates; papers concerning their foundation and their statutes; papers about their finances, both general and domestic; papers about the administration of the college; and, in some cases, a few personal papers.

Most of the archivists were brought in specially for this work. William Macray and George Parker normally worked at the Bodleian Library (both of them fitting in their college work at evenings and weekends), while Charles Trice Martin was employed at the Public Record Office (apparently working in Oxford during extended periods of leave). W.H. Stevenson, Herbert Hurst, and Noel Denholm-Young, on the other hand, had acquired scholarly reputations as antiquaries. Charles Shadwell was the only cataloguer who was already a fellow of his college when he started work on its archive (although both Macray and Denholm-Young eventually obtained fellowships at Magdalen).

Certain salient points emerge from an examination of their cataloguing. Some archivists (like Macray, Stevenson, and Denholm-Young) only catalogued title deeds, and usually medieval ones at that; some (like Shadwell) included other medieval documents; and some (like Trice Martin, Parker, and Hurst) tried to catalogue everything they could find in the archives.

Most of the archivists, however, adopted similar policies for what they catalogued. Just about all of them worked within a two-level hierarchical structure of place (or subject) and number, akin to fonds (or sub-fonds) and item. Parker at Balliol created a three-level structure, but this was closer to a location list for cabinet, drawer, and item, and Stevenson at Merton created something akin to an entirely flat-level structure, putting all Merton's medieval deeds in one continuous numerical sequence.

Their arrangements at item level were not always the same. Most of the archivists, like Macray, Hurst, and Denholm-Young, gathered all the deeds relating to a particular place and shuffled them into one chronological sequence, taking no care to establish any finer distinctions, such as whether there were deeds relating to separate properties within the place concerned. Shadwell (in his printed catalogue) and Trice Martin, for all that they likewise employed a two-level structure, did at least try to group within these sections the deeds relating to particular properties.

To understand the problems with such arrangement, we might look at two works that were available to the later of these cataloguers. Muller, Feith, and Fruin's *Handleiding voor het Ordenen en Beschrijven van Archieven* (*Manual*

for the *Arrangement and Description of Archives*; hereafter the Dutch *Manual*) was published in 1898, but the French translation of 1910 was well known in England⁴ and was a great influence on Hilary Jenkinson's *A Manual of Archive Administration Including the Problems of War Archives and Archive Making*, published in 1922.⁵ These books, which form the foundation of modern Anglo-Saxon archival thinking, eventually replaced the systems that had been adopted in Oxford in the middle of the nineteenth century, although these practices continued to be employed for years after the books were published. A comparison of the policies in both books with the practices used in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Oxford will illustrate how these practices differ from modern procedure.⁶

The most immediately apparent difference is the Oxford archivists' interest in arranging documents in an entirely chronological order. The first to adopt such a system was William Macray, a graduate of Magdalen College, who by the 1860s was working in the Bodleian Library.⁷ In November 1863, the Governing Body of Magdalen instituted a committee "to consider the state of the Muniment Tower, with power to call in Mr. Macray to assist them in arranging the documents," and in May 1864, it agreed "that the Deeds &c in the Muniment room be inventoried & put in order according to Mr. Macray's suggestion."⁸

Over the next fourteen years, Macray worked at Magdalen in his spare time, confining himself to the college's medieval title deeds, stored then (as now) in the boxes and cupboards constructed for them in its muniment room in the late fifteenth century. He made no attempt to list either the deeds relating to properties acquired by the college in post-medieval times or any other type of document. Confining himself to Magdalen's medieval title deeds was, however, no mean task because the college possesses over 12,000 of them. The deeds, as Macray found them, had been sorted into boxes divided by parish or manor (which themselves had been placed in cupboards according to county) in the late fifteenth century, and they had been assigned numbers

4 Margaret Proctor, "Life Before Jenkinson – the Development of British Archival Theory and Thought at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," *Archives* 33 (2008): 138–39.

5 We have used Samuel Muller, Johan A. Feith, and Robert Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, trans. Arthur H. Leavitt (New York, 1940), and Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, 2nd ed. (London, 1937).

6 We do not mean to suggest that the Dutch *Manual* or Jenkinson's *Manual* are – or, indeed, should be – identical to modern practice, but we do hold that the fundamental principles of archival theory remain those derived via these works.

7 For more information on William Macray and earlier cataloguing activity at Magdalen, see Darwall-Smith and Riordan, 97–98 and 107–8, as well as *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. "Macray, William Dunn," <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/38395> (accessed 30 November 2011).

8 Madgalen College Archives, CMM/1/5, fols. 77r, 81v.

within each box in a somewhat random way by a group of fellows in the 1610s.

Macray first described all the documents he found, working his way through the deeds one box at a time. Each deed was calendared meticulously on a slip of paper, and as he worked through a box, he arranged his slips in chronological order. The resulting piles of slips were then arranged by county, to reflect their storage in the muniment room's cupboards, and then bound into forty-two volumes. Macray's arrangement was, however, entirely conceptual: he did not renumber or rearrange the deeds themselves, which were left in their boxes in their seventeenth-century order.

Macray structured his catalogue in terms of two levels, one for the boxes of deeds and the other for the individual deeds within it. If the deeds within a box related to the history of one single property, then Macray's single chronological arrangement was sensible enough. However, this was rarely the case. Magdalen's founder, William Waynflete, Bishop of Winchester and Lord Chancellor of England, had had several religious houses and hospitals closed down and their estates transferred to his new foundation. Therefore there are many cases where the story of an estate is a complex one.

Magdalen's properties within the city of Oxford provide such a story. Magdalen was founded on the site of the Hospital of St. John the Baptist, which was closed down to make way for the college and whose lands were given to it. The hospital had acquired many properties in Oxford, especially in the parish of St. Peter in the East, where its central site lay, and Magdalen would acquire more. The college administrators of the late fifteenth century put all the deeds concerning properties from St. Peter in the East into three boxes, so extensive were they, and the cataloguers of the seventeenth century duly listed the contents of each box, assigning numbers in their customary random way.

When William Macray catalogued these deeds in 1865–66, he saw those relating to St. Peter in the East as a single whole and so, having produced slips for the contents of all three boxes, he put them into one chronological order. Anyone interested in a particular deed could find it easily enough, but there was a major problem. The topographical history of the St. Peter in the East properties was very complex, with many different houses requiring separate examination. Macray, by creating one gigantic sequence of deeds, had made it well-nigh impossible to distinguish their discrete histories.⁹

A decade later, the fellows of Merton College decided to have their archives properly described and arranged. Like the fellows of Magdalen, they found an outside expert, in the shape of W.H. Stevenson.¹⁰ Stevenson, the son of a timber merchant, had had little formal education but had produced some

9 Although not completely so, as H.E. Salter showed (see p. 110 below).

10 Stevenson's work at Merton is discussed further in Riordan, 58.

well-regarded editions of medieval deeds. At Merton, he encountered a situation analogous to Magdalen's: a muniment room containing a series of boxes, each one containing bundles of deeds relating to a particular estate. The bundles were not particularly well ordered, but each box contained a rough list of its contents. Again, as at Magdalen, title deeds and manorial records were kept separate from the other documents in the archive.

Stevenson, too, was mainly interested in estate papers, in his case the title deeds and manorial records (although he did also list the college's early domestic accounts), but he paid little heed to post-medieval records. His policy was to take a box, pull out the first document to hand, assign a number and stamp it on the document, write a catalogue entry for it, and then put it in a new box, before moving on. Unlike Macray, Stevenson did not divide his deeds into sections, but instead created one vast continuous numerical system.

Having renumbered and rearranged the documents, Stevenson then produced a finding aid for them. For this, he organized his slips not by individual parish or manor but chronologically within each county, while still keeping the records physically stored by the random number. For Oxford and Oxfordshire, Stevenson did relent and create catalogues for Oxford city, Holywell, and the village of Cuxham, where Merton was lord of the manor, but within Oxford city all the deeds were arranged in one sequence, without any division by parish, let alone by individual property.

The finding aids produced by Macray and Stevenson show little interest in making sense of the growth of the colleges' estates, and their single numerical and chronological ordering created almost a single-level structure. They have left us, to all intents and purposes, with a series of individual documents, thus providing no means of making sense of any sections of the archive, let alone the whole fonds.

The authors of the Dutch *Manual* understood this problem. When discussing such chronological arrangements, they noted that "for the writers of political history, inventories arranged in this manner are easy to use, since one finds in them at a single glance all that relates to a given period." Nevertheless, "it is absolutely impossible to obtain a general view of the contents," but "by far the worst objection, however, is that in breaking up the numerous dossiers the natural relation of the documents is destroyed."¹¹

In other words, we should have what Jenkinson referred to as *respect pour les fonds*. For him, respect des fonds was the key archival principle – "whatever else we do we must not break up the Archive Group."¹² He agreed with the Dutch *Manual* that no cataloguing can be based "in the subject interests they may possess for modern students, in chronology, or even in the form in

11 Muller, Feith, and Fruin, 49–50.

12 Jenkinson, 101–2.

which they are cast,”¹³ which in one sentence condemns most of the cataloguing in Oxford colleges between 1860 and 1930. Jenkinson himself had contacts in Oxford colleges,¹⁴ and so he might well have had the college catalogues in mind when he stated that “separation for one reason or another of documents that have been preserved together is so common an error, and so fatal.”¹⁵

This fatal error can be seen at work at Balliol College. In 1877, its Governing Body agreed that George Parker “should be employed in arranging the College papers.”¹⁶ Parker, like Macray, worked at the Bodleian Library and similarly carried out this task in his spare time, completing it in 1889. Balliol’s archives had been sorted in the 1670s, but it is unclear whether they had been numbered or not. Parker certainly did so, and went further than Macray and Stevenson in rearranging the archives according to his classification scheme, and evidently having fresh storage created for them.

Parker’s scheme involved the creation of several cabinets with drawers. The cabinets were given letters of the alphabet, and the drawers numbers. Each document within a drawer was then numbered so that they all had references along the lines of “D.4.16” to reflect in which drawer of which cabinet they could be found. Parker’s reference system, for all that it had three rather than two levels of reference, was nonetheless more akin to a location list than an archival finding aid, and his working methods were somewhat disorganized, as an examination of his cabinets A and B shows. Drawers A.1–A.13 contain deeds on properties in various Oxford city parishes, while drawers A.14–A.23 concern properties in various parishes in Oxfordshire. Drawers B.1–B.11, however, return to Oxford city parishes, several of which had been encountered in the previous cabinet; drawers B.12, B.14, and B.16 contain documents about property in London, but drawers B.13, B.15, and B.17 contain material about Oxford again; and then B.18–B.23 are exclusively concerned with London.

This apparent carelessness continues within each of Parker’s drawers. Drawers A.1–A.3 contain documents about three different houses in the same Oxford street. However, rather than arrange the documents about each property into one drawer each, Parker distributed them among all three drawers in an almost random manner. For all that Parker took twelve years to work on the Balliol archives (one of the smaller college archives), the result has a somewhat preliminary feel.

13 Ibid., 97.

14 For his friendship with George Gordon, President of Magdalen, for example, see Darwall-Smith and Riordan, 110.

15 Jenkinson, 84.

16 Balliol’s archive cataloguing is discussed in John Jones, *The Archives of Balliol College Oxford: A Guide* (Chichester, 1984), 1–4.

Half a century later, Oxford collections were still being split up, at least conceptually. Noel Denholm-Young worked in several college archives in the 1920s and 1930s,¹⁷ but only one of his Oxford catalogues was published, namely a list of the medieval archives of Christ Church, produced in 1931.¹⁸ His book is something of an appendix to three separate works, because documents at Christ Church concerning its two main predecessor organizations had attracted other scholars' attention. S.R. Wigram had produced *The Cartulary of the Monastery of St Frideswide at Oxford* in two volumes in 1895–96, and H.E. Salter was publishing the *Cartulary of Osney Abbey* in six volumes between 1929 and 1936 (Denholm-Young's volume was published halfway through this series). Furthermore, several Christ Church deeds, which had been acquired in the seventeenth century by Anthony Wood and bequeathed by him to the Bodleian, had been calendared in W.H. Turner and H.O. Coxe's *Calendar of Charters and Rolls Preserved in the Bodleian Library*.¹⁹ Effectively, Denholm-Young's task was to gather together all medieval documents not listed in these works and to try to give some unity to the whole.

Faced with the twin challenges of avoiding unnecessary duplication and trying to conceive some overall structure, Denholm-Young had a difficult task, and he started well by arranging all the deeds according to the religious house or institution from which they had originated. Problems emerge, however, when one examines the *Cartulary* in detail. Denholm-Young created a new numbering scheme for the Osney Abbey deeds and merely gave a concordance with Salter's numbers before calendaring thirty documents omitted by the latter. For deeds relating to the Priory of St. Frideswide, Denholm-Young also reordered Wigram's numbers, sometimes calendaring them, sometimes merely giving Wigram's reference, but also giving just the references to Anthony Wood's charters. Once again, a few deeds omitted by Wigram appeared at the end of the section. However, as Denholm-Young explained, "the charters calendared below form only a small portion of the archives of St. Frideswide's, for the priory lands outside Oxford, although granted to Cardinal College, did not form part of the endowment of Henry VIII's foundation."²⁰ The sections on the deeds relating to these two institutions, therefore,

17 For more on Denholm-Young, see Darwall-Smith and Riordan, 109–10.

18 N. Denholm-Young, ed., *Cartulary of the Mediaeval Archives of Christ Church*, Oxford Historical Society xcii (Oxford, 1931). The records, though still owned by Christ Church, had been deposited in the Bodleian Library in 1927.

19 S.R. Wigram, ed., *The Cartulary of the Monastery of St Frideswide at Oxford*, Oxford Historical Society xxviii, xxxi (Oxford, 1895–6); H.E. Salter, ed., *Cartulary of Osney Abbey*, Oxford Historical Society lxxxix, xc, xci, xcvi, xcvi, ci (Oxford, 1929–36); Bodleian Library, *Calendar of Charters and Rolls Preserved in the Bodleian Library*, ed. W.H. Turner & H.O. Coxe (Oxford, 1878).

20 Denholm-Young, 21.

are well-nigh unusable unless read with the nine volumes of Salter, Wigram, and Turner and Coxe all to hand.

Less work had been done on the other institutions represented in this volume, such as Daventry Priory, but again Denholm-Young, faced with several deeds previously calendared by Turner and Coxe, gave only their references and no more.

The deeds that Denholm-Young *did* calendar were arranged within each section by place, and each section has a continuous numerical sequence (so that deeds from Daventry Priory are numbered D.1–D.140, but those for Osney Abbey are O.1–O.1123, and so on). Within each place, the deeds are listed in a single sequence, with individual properties jumbled up.

As a result, the medieval archives of Christ Church are perhaps the most inaccessible, conceptually, of any collection in Oxford. Not only is one fonds split across four different publications, all of which need to be consulted to get any overall idea of what the collection contains, but Denholm-Young’s book, in particular, offers no assistance if one wants to do anything more than look up names and places. Denholm-Young was certainly dealt a difficult hand, and Christ Church does possess a daunting quantity of medieval documents, not dissimilar to Magdalen’s in scope, but his book has, if anything, made matters worse.

One can contrast this with the work of Charles Trice Martin at All Souls College. He worked at the Public Record Office and is still remembered for his valuable palaeographical guide, *The Record Interpreter*.²¹ He apparently worked in Oxford during his vacations, and did so with remarkable speed: All Souls engaged him in the spring of 1874, and his work was substantially complete by April 1876. It took almost as long again to publish his catalogue, copies of which finally reached All Souls in December 1877.²²

The reader of Trice Martin’s catalogue²³ first finds lists of documents relating to the college’s properties. These cover all types of records, including title deeds, leases (extending to the middle of the nineteenth century), accounts, letters, and maps. The first 280 or so pages of his printed catalogue, therefore, are devoted to estate papers, but the remaining 135 pages list other documents, arranged under such headings as “Terriers of Divers Lands,” “Chartae fundationis Collegii et ejusdem privilegiorum,” “Injunctions, Mandates, Letters, etc. of Kings, Archbishops, etc.,” “Rolls and Books in the Lower Room,” and – inevitably – “Miscellanea.” Each section begins with a new numerical sequence. Thus one could find a document in the archives of All Souls with

21 Charles Trice Martin, *The Record Interpreter: A Collection of Abbreviations, Latin Words and Names Used in English Historical Manuscripts and Records* (London, 1892).

22 All Souls College Archives, MS 419.

23 Charles Trice Martin, *Catalogue of the Archives in the Muniment Room of All Souls’ College* (London, 1877).

a reference comprising a section heading plus a number (e.g., “Edgeware 37” or “Injunctions, Mandates, Letters, etc. 153”). Finally, the documents in All Souls were numbered and arranged according to Trice Martin’s scheme.

Trice Martin’s approach to the estates of All Souls differed from that of the other archivists so far examined. To begin with, individual properties were arranged in alphabetical order, irrespective of county or provenance. A property granted to the college as part of its initial endowment was listed alongside an advowson purchased in the eighteenth century. However, within his description of each property, Trice Martin could be sensitive to its history. His treatment of the college’s properties in Oxford bears comparison with Macray’s, for Trice Martin tried to isolate the histories of individual properties, listing their deeds in separate sequences. Thus, of his Oxford documents, nos. 1–7 relate to one property, nos. 8–19 to another, nos. 20–56 to a third, and so on. He was not always consistent in this approach, but whereas Macray and Denholm-Young were content with a two-level archival description of their archives, Trice Martin was finding his way to a three-level one at All Souls. The key to this might be seen in a methodological statement in the introduction to his catalogue:

The presses in the archive room are divided into drawers marked with the name of some college estate or some class of documents, and these are in many cases subdivided into partitions, similarly marked. In this catalogue care has been taken to preserve the original arrangement as nearly as possible, consistently with arranging each division of documents in chronological order.²⁴

Unlike the other archivists, not only was he observing respect des fonds, but also preserving the original order of the documents. For Jenkinson (who started work at the PRO in the year that Trice Martin retired), any arrangement’s “object will clearly be to establish or re-establish the original arrangement.”²⁵ He believed that “the only correct basis of Arrangement is exposition of the Administrative objects which the Archives originally served,” with which the Dutch *Manual* agreed, stating that “the system of arrangement must be based on the original organization of the archival collection, which in the main corresponds to the organization of the administrative body that produced it.”²⁶

Macray, Stevenson, Parker, and Denholm-Young classified the deeds in their care by geographical unit and then organized them chronologically. They had failed to realize, in contrast to Jenkinson and the Dutch trio, that the deeds were not just nuggets of information but evidence of transactions carried out according to the functions of the college that had created them.

24 Trice Martin, *Catalogue*, vi–vii.

25 Jenkinson, 99.

26 *Ibid.*, 97; Muller, Feith, and Fruin, 52.

The consequences of this are particularly clear in the work of Herbert Hurst. Born in Temple Cowley, near Oxford, he worked as a schoolmaster in London and Oxford, until he matriculated in 1882 at Oxford as a non-collegiate student aged 48. By 1891, he was calling himself a “Librarian” and was living in Oxford.²⁷

Hurst was in his mid-sixties when Brasenose College employed him to catalogue its archives in 1898, evidently hoping to have the work completed for the quatercentenary in 1909, but he had big plans.²⁸ He followed Trice Martin and Parker in cataloguing everything he could find in the archive room. He also introduced an innovation in Oxford by commissioning several thousand printed slips, which he completed for each record. Each slip had spaces for such categories as “kind of document,” “grantor,” “press-mark,” “grantee,” and the like, and he set to work on his project (assisted, according to college legend, by a regular supply of sherry). Eventually, when he had completed this work of description, he arranged his slips and had them bound up in thirty-six volumes.

Hurst’s individual slips worked for describing title deeds, but – as so often was the case with college archivists of the nineteenth century – his scheme did not work so well elsewhere. Having filled twenty-nine volumes with his slips for title deeds, he assigned to the remaining seven such titles as “Schools,” “Bursarial,” and (of course) “Miscellaneous,” while on his slips he had to leave categories blank or cross out their headings, as he found that he had created a Procrustean bed for his cataloguing.

Nevertheless, by 1911 Hurst had described about 120,000 documents. He had assigned a new number to each document and had arranged his slips into new series, which were rather more logically arranged than those of Parker – let alone of Stevenson and Macray. He then had all the documents physically rearranged to match his volumes of slips and stored in the archive room, which appears to have been itself remodelled for the purpose.

In some ways, Hurst was the most systematic and thoughtful college archivist of the nineteenth century so far encountered, but he too fell victim to an approach that could not go beyond a two-level cataloguing scheme. Brasenose owned several estates in Cropredy, a village in north Oxfordshire, and Hurst, like most of his predecessors, shuffled the Cropredy deeds into one continuous chronological order. Unfortunately, the Cropredy properties were complex ones, because some of them were owned by the college outright, but others were owned by a trust to support the village school, with the college acting as chief trustee. Hurst’s arrangement ignored these distinct provenances, failing to recognize that they constituted separate administrative units.

27 Evidence from a search of census returns for 1841–1911.

28 Hurst’s work is also discussed in Riordan, 58–59.

One might compare this to the work of Charles Shadwell, who, unlike the previous cataloguers, was a fellow of his college (and was elected its provost, the head of the college, in 1905). Rather curiously, he seems to have described the Oriel archives twice. His second attempt, dating from 1893 to 1905, was privately printed as a set of ten “Fasciculi,” each one devoted to a particular set of documents. Thus Fasciculus I is titled “Concerning the College and the Members thereof,” while Fasciculi IV and V are “Concerning the College Tenements in Oxford,” and so on.

Although Shadwell included descriptions of some post-medieval papers in the sections on college administration, just about all the deeds calendared in the printed catalogue are medieval. Any properties acquired in more recent years are ignored. Shadwell also did not describe any leases or related papers, although as an alternative he did append to his descriptions of the deeds of the larger estates outside Oxford sections titled “Leases,” which are little essays about the tenants of the property in question. Shadwell certainly tried to place all the deeds relating to particular properties into separate sections. Unfortunately, his topographical approach failed when Oriel acquired several properties from different parishes in the same transaction. One such occasion occurred in 1361 when Oriel’s provost, William de Daventre, formally made over to the college three properties in three separate parishes. The deeds for these properties are all duly calendared under their parishes in Fasciculi IV and V, but Shadwell found himself having to describe the same deed in two or even three different places, with some complex cross-referencing.

Nevertheless, Shadwell did produce one splendid piece of archival detective work. His Fasciculus VIII concerns properties in Essex that John Carpenter, Bishop of Worcester, gave to the college in 1451. Although almost all of these lands were acquired in a single purchase by Carpenter, their history was complex, with earlier owners gradually accumulating collections of properties. Shadwell rose to the challenge, producing a catalogue in which he not only separated the deeds relating to each property but also explained the history of their ownership. As an example of sensitivity to provenance and original ordering, Shadwell’s Fasciculus VIII is a splendid piece of work.

Shadwell’s work on Oriel’s Essex properties stands in contrast to Hurst’s Croppedy catalogue and the chronological rearrangements of Macray and Stevenson, who break up “the numerous dossiers” in the way deplored by the Dutch *Manual* and fail to appreciate what Jenkinson understood: that arrangement should be carried out “in such a way that the Archive significance of every document – its own nature and its relation to its neighbours – is brought out as clearly as possible.”²⁹

29 Muller, Feith, and Fruin, 50; Jenkinson, 97.

Luciana Duranti has summed up this attitude well by suggesting that the meaning of the record is determined by the “archival bond,” which she defines as “the network of relationships that each record has with the records belonging in the same aggregation.” By breaking this bond, one not only diminishes the meaning of the records, but also “their authenticity cannot be ascertained and, consequently, their content cannot be trusted.”³⁰ We can see this bond being preserved by Trice Martin, who told the warden of All Souls that:

In my previous letter I suggested that the smaller documents written on slips of parchment might be found in portfolios for their better preservation & for convenience of reference, but on further consideration I think that that process might be dispensed with. Many of them, such as the bonds of tenants of the College, could be placed in the drawers with the deeds with which they are connected, and the others merely numbered and tied up in bundles.³¹

Trice Martin realized that there is a connection between the documents and that this connection must be preserved. In contrast, the forms that Hurst devised forced him to treat each document as a single item, discrete and alone, losing the connection with the other documents and therefore breaking the archival bond.

The catalogues of Oxford college archivists between 1860 and 1930, with the exception of Trice Martin at All Souls and perhaps Shadwell at Oriel, broke up the series that they found, thus destroying the original order and failing to preserve the provenance and context of the records. They concentrated instead on the content of each record and then classified them by geography and chronology, creating two-level, sometimes even just one-level, arrangements. This is the fetishization of the content of the records at the expense of the context.

Yet if we are to learn anything from the Oxford archivists’ work, we must understand why they arranged the records as they did. Many of them, certainly, began their work prior to the codifications of the Dutch *Manual* and Jenkinson’s *Manual*, but an instinctive knowledge of provenance had existed before. The catalogue of St. John’s College, compiled around 1615, separated the manor, the parsonage, and the chantry house of the Oxfordshire village of Charlbury, recognizing them as discrete administrative units,³² and a century later William Derham rearranged the St. John’s archive with a system that created different series as an intellectual concept distinct from their physical arrangement.³³

30 Luciana Duranti, “The Archival Bond,” *Archives and Museum Informatics* 11, nos. 3–4 (January 1997): 215–18.

31 All Souls College Archives, uncatalogued papers, C. Trice Martin to F.K. Leighton, 4 April 1874.

32 St. John’s College Archives, Cat 1, fols. 21r, 32r, 34r.

33 For more on Derham, see Darwall-Smith and Riordan, 104–5.

Perhaps the best example of this, though, is in the work of William Smith, a fellow of University College, who both arranged and described his college's entire archive in the early eighteenth century.³⁴ He likewise divided University College's Oxford properties according to parish, putting his documents into a series of "Pyxides," or boxes, so that Pyx A held deeds relating to properties in the parish of St. Mary the Virgin, Pyx A2 those in the parish of St. Peter in the East, and so on. He then introduced a third level to his listing, akin to a modern series, dividing up deeds relating to each property in separate "fascicula," or bundles, which he numbered within each parish according to the order in which the college had acquired them, thereby creating a reference like "Pyx A2 fasc. 2 no. 3."

The challenge for Smith arose with a group of properties in several Oxford parishes that University College had acquired in 1361 and which had involved it in three decades' worth of legal disputes.³⁵ Even those of Smith's nineteenth-century successors who separated deeds relating to individual properties would have split up these lands by parish, not least because University College came to own other properties in most of these parishes anyway.

Smith, however, treated these lands as a discrete unit, and so assigned Pyxides C1, C2, D1, D2, and E1 to the documents concerning them. Within his boxes, Smith provided separate fascicules for groups of deeds concerning the properties before 1361, the lawsuits fought by the college, and then such leases as were preserved after the dispute was settled in the college's favour. Thanks to Smith's subtle use of his fascicules as an intermediate sorting tool, University College's papers on these lands are arranged in a way that reflects their administrative history.

Although Smith assigned references to his documents on the basis of their location and did not conceive of a classification scheme totally separate from a location list, his organization of University College's archives shows a sensitivity to provenance, context, and original order that none of the Victorian archivists discussed here can match.³⁶

Smith, in his *Annals of University College*, reveals his methodology when he observes that records must "be disposed by some skillful Person into the Order that the due Nature of them requires." He illustrates this by discussing

34 See further Darwall-Smith and Riordan, 99–103. For more information on Smith's life, see *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. "Smith, William," <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/25927> (accessed 30 November 2011).

35 This complex story is told in more detail in Robin Darwall-Smith, *A History of University College, Oxford* (Oxford, 2008), 34–43.

36 Smith had evidently thought carefully about how to arrange the archives of University College, and though it is clear that he was well acquainted with the work carried out by Brian Twyne in the Oxford University Archives in the early seventeenth century, further research is needed to discover what other influences he may have had.

deeds concerning college property in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, which another fellow had tried to arrange:

Now some ignorant Person to keep, as he imagined, all the Deeds he found together in their due Order, the First he marked 1^a, the second he marked 2d, and so on as they came to Hand, to the Number of above Eighty. And, according as they were thus signed, the *Amanuensis* was ordered to Copy them ... But when I came to examine this Transcript, I found them all out of Place and Order, as perchance the first last, the last tenth, and the twentieth in some other Place, without any Coherence or Dependence one upon another. ... So that I was forced to cast the Copy quite aside, and betake me to the Originals, and sever them into so many Heaps, as there were single Houses, or Quit-Rents out of several Houses.³⁷

Despite his Georgian vocabulary, Smith reveals himself as a forefather to the first archival theorists of the later nineteenth and early twentieth century. His “sever[ing] them into so many Heaps” prefigures Jenkinson’s dictum that the archivist’s “object will clearly be to establish or re-establish the original arrangement,” and the mess made by Smith’s predecessors could be seen by the writers of the Dutch *Manual* as an unwitting attempt to destroy the “natural relation of the document,” just as Macray, Stevenson, and the others would do a century later.³⁸ We must therefore ask why.

All of them were involved in the editing and publishing of records. The record printing societies, most of which published full transcripts of records, though some printed just calendars and indexes, had begun with the Surtees Society in 1834 and the Camden in 1838. By the end of the century, there were ten national publishing societies (most of which had a thematic interest) in England and fourteen local societies.³⁹ The Camden was founded in order “to perpetuate, and render accessible, whatever is valuable, but at present little known, amongst the materials for the Civil, Ecclesiastical, or Literary History of the United Kingdom.”⁴⁰ Note that its intention was not only to provide easier access but also to perpetuate the documents; an act of preservation is implied. Thomas Stapleton took this to heart when he published the Plumpton Correspondence for the Society in 1839 with the dual aim “to preserve and make known such remains.”⁴¹ Fifty years later, in 1884, the prospectus issued

37 William Smith, *The Annals of University-College. Proving William of Durham the True Founder: And Answering all their Arguments Who Ascribe it to King Alfred* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1728), xviii–xxii.

38 Jenkinson, 99; Muller, Feith, and Fruin, 50.

39 These are all listed in E.L.C. Mullins, *Texts and Calendars: An Analytical Guide to Serial Publications*, Royal Historical Society Guides and Handbooks 7 (London, 1958).

40 Camden Society, Prospectus, in the back of *Historie of the Arrivall of Edward IV. in England and the Finall Recouerye of His Kingdomes from Henry VI. A.D. M.CCCC.LXXI*, ed. J. Bruce, Camden Society o.s. 1 (London, 1838), 1.

41 *Plumpton Correspondence: A Series of Letters, Chiefly Domestick, Written in the Reigns of*

for the Oxford Historical Society observed that “while free permission would be given to the editor to calendar certain parts, nothing would be omitted which is of permanent interest.”⁴² If printing a record is preservation, then the printed record is the record. To the Victorian, if it had the same contents as the record, then the surrogate became the record.

And if the contents were all that mattered, then the records could be arranged to suit the contents – which is what happened with the printing societies. Some brought together the records referring to the locality in national sequences. Thus, Emanuel Green collected the feet of fines⁴³ relating to Somerset for that county’s Record Society in 1892. Revealingly, he gave each fine a number but provided no external references. In effect, his edition replaced the original documents – neither Green nor the society could understand why anyone would want to refer back to the originals.⁴⁴ Others collected records about a particular subject from various sources. Thus, George Ornsby, preparing a volume for the Surtees Society in 1869, noted that “the collection of papers, illustrative of the life of Bishop Cosin ... has been gathered from various sources,”⁴⁵ while John Bloxam’s *Magdalen College and King James II*, published by the Oxford Historical Society in 1886, brought together every record he could find relating to the crisis at Magdalen in James’s short reign. They included records from Magdalen’s own archive, the British Museum, the Bodleian, and private collections, but Bloxam never stated which records came from where. There was no need – he had formed his own archive on the subject in this volume, which superseded the original records.⁴⁶

The Oxford college archivists therefore had many patterns to draw upon in the publications of these societies, which demonstrated to them that the fonds could be broken up, indeed should be broken up, if it was deemed more convenient to the user. Shadwell’s “Fasciculi” closely resemble these works, for he not only catalogued records found at Oriel but also included descriptions of documents that related to Oriel yet were not physically in the archive. In Fasciculus I, for example, documents on the college’s foundation and stat-

Edward IV. Richard III. Henry VII. and Henry VIII., ed. Thomas Stapleton, Camden Society o.s. 4 (London, 1839), ii.

42 John Richard Green and Oxford Historical Society, *Prospectus of the Oxford Historical Society* (Oxford, 1883), 11.

43 Feet of fines were a series of records comprising the bottom part (or foot) of a tripartite indenture called a final concord (or fine). The two upper parts were kept by the parties making the agreement, and the foot was preserved by the court in which the fine was made.

44 Emanuel Green, ed., *Pedes Finium: Commonly Called Feet of Fines, for the County of Somerset*, Somerset Record Society 6 (London, 1892).

45 George Ornsby, ed., *The Correspondence of John Cosin, D.D., Lord Bishop of Durham: Together with Other Papers Illustrative of His Life and Times*, Surtees Society 52 (Durham, 1869), v.

46 J.R. Bloxam, ed., *Magdalen College and King James II, 1686–1688: A Series of Documents*, Oxford Historical Society vi (Oxford, 1886).

utes from the archive are listed alongside documents in Close Rolls, Episcopal Registers, and in college registers. This became a subject-based rather than a provenance-based catalogue.

A modern parallel can be seen in the community archives movement. These archives are generally digital collections in which members of a particular community upload their own content. Andrew Flinn has suggested that these “created” or “artificial” collections do “not fit well with narrow, and perhaps overly restrictive, professional definitions of records and archives.”⁴⁷ But he sees this challenge primarily in terms of custody, as “a challenge to conceptions of professional archival practice and understanding that hold that the preservation and ‘authenticity’ of all important archival materials can only be ensured by being kept ‘continuously’ within a formal archive, and cared for there by professionals.”⁴⁸ Yet there is a greater problem in that these items exist without any real sense of provenance. One might take, as a randomly chosen example, the Fakenham and District Community Archive, a collection of documents relating to the Norfolk market town.⁴⁹ The site includes many fascinating photographs, some given by Fakenham Museum but most uploaded by members of the public. This is certainly a way to make many more photographs and records available, but each photograph is without any real provenance. The donor is listed, but were these photographs inherited, discovered, or purchased? This, not custody, is the real threat to the authenticity of these photographs, and therefore to this archive’s continuing use, because it is impossible to be sure that the photograph represents what it claims to be, for information about its creation has been lost.

Similar problems can be seen in the various “digital archives” on the Internet. These are more analogous to an artificial collection than an organic archive. Nevertheless, Emily Monks-Leeson, in a recent essay, has suggested that these collections do provide the digitized documents with a provenance and that “understandings of provenance can shift to encompass not only the original contexts of creation ... but also those new contexts to which records come to belong.” Yet although such corpora do indeed provide new understandings of the documents, they often come (albeit unwittingly in many cases) to replace the original document and therefore loosen the moorings of its provenancial context. As Monks-Leeson observes, the problem remains “how online or Internet archives can assert their reliability as sources of history and memory.”⁵⁰

47 Andrew Flinn, “Community Histories, Community Archives: Some Opportunities and Challenges,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 28, no. 2 (October 2007): 167.

48 *Ibid.*, 167–68.

49 Fakenham and District Community Archive, <http://fakenhamcommunityarchive.weebly.com/index.html> (archived at <http://www.webcitation.org/6A6kIWZwq> on 22 August 2012).

50 Emily Monks-Leeson, “Archives on the Internet: Representing Contexts and Provenance

This is not confined to the digital world; books created virtual corpora long before computers did so. In five volumes of the Oxford Historical Society, H.E. Salter did precisely this for collections at Balliol, Magdalen, and Oriel.⁵¹ Salter never worked as an archivist, but he transcribed and published many archival documents, and so he was confronted with the problem of how to present them in his books.

In the Balliol volume, Salter departed from Parker's arrangement, generally for the better, as he sorted Balliol's deeds to much more accurate topographical effect, listing all documents concerning one property in the same section. However, Salter did considerable violence to Parker's scheme, and created a new continuous numerical scheme for the documents from 1 to 609 (while giving Parker's numbers in the margin and providing a concordance as an appendix). The numbers in Salter's arrangement are entirely virtual and bear no relation to anything that could be found in Balliol.

Salter took the same approach in his *Cartulary of the Hospital of St. John the Baptist*, in which he transcribed Oxford deeds from Magdalen's archives. Here, Salter was faced with William Macray's arrangement of deeds by parish only. Nevertheless, Oxford's greatest topographer was not daunted, and he succeeded in teasing out the history of each individual property throughout the city. Eventually, Salter identified deeds relating to several dozen individual properties within the parish of St. Peter in the East alone, and carefully laid them out as such in his volumes. But this was done with no thanks to Macray: once again, Salter created his own order and his own continuous numbering system, giving the seventeenth-century numbers in the margin and totally ignoring Macray's. Indeed, Macray's name is conspicuously absent, even from the preface to this work.

Salter could not be so dismissive of Provost Shadwell of Oriel, and this work is even advertised on the title page as being the work of both men, but pieties having been duly observed, Salter tore up the arrangement of Shadwell's printed "Fasciculi" and started again. Salter did retain the overall shape of Shadwell's design, with sections on the foundation of the college, the site of the college, and deeds on individual college properties all over Oxford, yet if Salter thought he could arrange the deeds better within each section, he did so. He provided archive references to documents, but used only older, existing numbers, discarding the references given in Shadwell's "Fasciculi." It is therefore impossible to use these works side by side.

from Repository to Website," *American Archivist* 74, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2011): 56.

51 H.E. Salter, ed., *The Oxford Deeds of Balliol College*, Oxford Historical Society lxiv (Oxford, 1913); H.E. Salter, ed., *Cartulary of the Hospital of St. John the Baptist*, Oxford Historical Society lxvi, lxviii, lxix (Oxford, 1914–17); and C.L. Shadwell and H.E. Salter, eds., *Oriel College Records*, Oxford Historical Society lxxxv (Oxford, 1926).

Salter’s work is almost the apotheosis of the approach of cataloguers like Shadwell and Macray, in that the arrangements set out in his transcriptions have ceased to have any link with the actual documents themselves. These publications were entirely virtual exercises, and it no longer mattered how easy it was to find the original: the calendars and transcripts, like modern “digital archives,” were deemed to be sufficient.

The development of these “digital archives” has been encouraged by the influence of postmodern thinking on archival theory and practice. This should be no surprise as postmodernists are interested in context, and that is the archival *raison d’être*. As Terry Cook has suggested, postmodernism “reflects the long-held archival concern for contextuality, for mapping the provenance interrelationship between the creator and the record, for determining context by reading through and behind text.”⁵² The importance of records lies not in their evidential value but in their contextual significance; in recognizing this, every user of a collection of records finds his or her own significance in the records, and they are given a new context within that user’s research interest.

This is made more difficult, however, by the fact that the archivist, by his arrangement and description, assigns each record a fixed context. For Brien Brothman, this is the attempt “to specify for all time the time when and place where the creation of meaning began and ended” by placing the record inside an envelope of determined context that “seals the fate of the documents.” The archivist is therefore involved in a paradoxical and Sisyphean attempt “to simultaneously keep records in and rescue records from their context.”⁵³ The postmodernist archivist must therefore break the envelope and free the record from its restraints.

This aim – to allow others to develop their own contextual relationships with the document – is laudable, but the practical consequence is to sever the content from its creating, provenancial context. In other words, just like the Oxford archivists of the nineteenth century, the postmodern archivist prejudices the content over the context. It is the same sort of thinking that led Denholm-Young at Magdalen to extract from the uncatalogued parts of the archives the documents that took his fancy, list them, give them a random number, and store them separately, wrenched from their original context. In both cases, the subjective archivist looks to the content for the meaning of the record and considers it in isolation from the other records, thus breaking the archival bond. Surely it is preferable to treat the provenance of the document not as an imprisoning context but as a podium on which the context provided

52 Terry Cook, “Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts,” *Archival Science* 1 (2001): 17.

53 Brien Brothman, “Declining Derrida: Integrity, Tensegrity, and the Preservation of Archives from Deconstruction,” *Archivaria* 48 (Fall 1999): 80–81.

by its creator can be clearly seen, yet from which the record can be studied from many positions, each providing its own context. The archivist's description, as Heather MacNeil says, "offers the user a stable point of departure and return."⁵⁴

Inevitably, our discussion of these archivists has emphasized the negative aspects of their work, but it is reasonable to ask what positive aims they had in their approach. William Macray offers some important indications here. In an interim report submitted to Magdalen in February 1868, he noted that "already ... considerable interest has been awakened by what has been done, and advantage derived from it by antiquaries. ... Mr. Gairdner, a well-known historical Editor, who is at work on a new edition of the Paston Papers, looks forward to gaining some new information from the examination of some of Sir John Fastolf's deeds." In his last report in 1878, Macray acknowledged "the constantly increasing interest that is being taken in all matters of local history and family genealogy" and even urged the college (unsuccessfully) to publish his calendars.⁵⁵

But college archives had not always been regarded in this way. The statutes for Corpus Christi College (founded in 1517), which became a model for later colleges, saw the muniments as weapons to defend their property and interests, insisting that they be preserved so that "the men of our College, when challenged to suits and arms, may be always ready, and not march to the pitched battle unarmed."⁵⁶ Most stipulated that outsiders were not to be admitted to the Muniment Room under any circumstances. Between 1851 and 1881, the Royal Commissions on the Universities rewrote these statutes and made public the colleges' estates holdings. In these circumstances, the ancient muniments seemed less relevant to college administration and came to be viewed more as historical sources. Earlier cataloguers (like Smith and Derham) had been college officials, and though many were also antiquaries, they always gave some thought to making the muniments available for administration. The new men, such as Macray and Stevenson, were concerned only with making them accessible to scholars like themselves. Jenkinson said that "most of the bad and dangerous work done in the past may be traced to external enthusiasms resulting in a failure on the part of the Archivist to treat Archives as a separate subject," and this is surely what he meant.⁵⁷ The

54 Heather MacNeil, "Picking Our Text: Archival Description, Authenticity, and the Archivist as Editor," *American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2005): 277.

55 Magdalen College Archives, EP/232/4 and MS 825.

56 "Ut in nostro collegio provocati ad lites et arma semper sint parati, nec ad pugnam in acie progrediantur inermes, statuimus ut eorum arma, hoc est, evidētia, chartae, munimenta et reliqua scripta." *Statutes of the Colleges of Oxford* ... Vol. II (10.), Corpus Christi College (Oxford, 1853), 93.

57 Jenkinson, 123–24.

college archivists failed to regard the arrangement and description of archives as a science, and so gave more thought to the convenience of users than to the nature of the records in their care.

The Dutch *Manual* states that “in the arrangement of an archival collection the interests of historical research should receive only secondary consideration,”⁵⁸ and Jenkinson agreed that “the Archivist, then, is a servant of his Archives first and afterwards of the student Public.” Precisely what “a servant of his Archives” means is clearer in a fuller passage: “in the first place he has to take all possible precautions for the safeguarding of his Archives and for their custody, which is the safeguarding of their essential qualities. Subject to the discharge of these duties he has in the second place to provide to the best of his ability for the needs of historians and other research workers.”⁵⁹ Before thinking of access, therefore, the archivist’s first concern should be securing the authenticity of the record.

Yet Natalie Ceeney, in an article written when she was chief executive of the UK’s National Archives, explicitly rebukes “Jenkinson on the core role of an archive.” She states, “I doubt that there are any serious commentators now who would doubt that a core role, probably the core role of an archive today, is around enabling access.”⁶⁰ It is therefore not surprising that UK official policy has tended to agree. In 1999 the *Government Policy on Archives* identified seven government policies that it claimed archives could support, but only one (the modernization of public services, calling for effective records management) did not focus on access.⁶¹ Five years later, in 2004, the Museum, Libraries and Archives Council produced *Listening to the Past, Speaking to the Future*, the report of the Archives Task Force appointed by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport. In his foreword, Mark Wood, the chair of the task force, stated that “our primary duty is to present the means to help every student, every would-be family historian, and every community group ... to benefit from this unique store of knowledge.”⁶² The trend is confirmed by the most recent report, *Archives for the 21st Century*, which notes that “since 1999 the archives sector has had some major achievements,” all of which relate to access or advocacy.⁶³

58 Muller, Feith, and Fruin, 65.

59 Jenkinson, 15, 124.

60 Natalie Ceeney, “The Role of a 21st-century National Archive – The Relevance of the Jenkinsonian Tradition, and a Redefinition for the Information Society,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 29, no. 1 (April 2008): 61.

61 Lord Chancellor’s Department, *Government Policy on Archives* (London, 1999), 6–7, 11, and 14.

62 Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, Archives Task Force, *Listening to the Past, Speaking to the Future* (London, 2004), 3.

63 Lord Chancellor’s Department, *Archives for the 21st Century* (London, 2009), 3–4.

Much the same can be seen at the US National Archives and Records Administration. Its strategic plan for 2006–2016, *Preserving the Past to Protect the Future*, states that its core mission is “to preserve, process, and provide access to the records of our Government,” yet its actual “Mission” is solely about “continuing access,” and of its six strategic goals, all but one are about access.⁶⁴ In Canada, the 2011–12 Program Activity Architecture for Library and Archives Canada subsumes appraisal, preservation, and description into the strategic outcome that “Canada’s continuing memory is documented and accessible to current and future generations.”⁶⁵ This therefore sets access as the principal strategic aim of the service, but defines it more broadly than the other services.

The national archive services of all three countries have therefore sent out clear signals that access is the priority for archives, and we can see how this has influenced local government archives in the UK, which have increasingly focused on recreational users. At the end of the twentieth century, thirty-six local government archives were part of the leisure sector, while only nine were in the central corporate department. As Mark Stevens says, “we have moved from defining our service in terms of our employers, to our depositors, to our visitors.”⁶⁶ Therefore, for many archive services, it is immediate access that defines their achievements, but have we returned to the situation of a century ago, when the archivist’s first thought was for the user, not the records? We can find more evidence for this in our finding aids.

In his summing up of 1878, William Macray noted that:

All Souls College have just printed a catalogue of all their muniments ... but as ... that Catalogue is but brief, and omits all detailed description of the documents which are calendared, I do not feel the exaction of the old condition with the maker of the windows that they should be as good as, if not better than, those of All Souls.⁶⁷

As this indicates, there was a great variety between the catalogues produced; some, like Trice Martin’s, were very summary, while others, like Macray’s,

64 US National Archives and Records Administration, “Preserving the Past to Protect the Future: The Strategic Plan of the National Archives and Record Administration, 2006–2016,” rev. ed. (2009), <http://www.archives.gov/about/plans-reports/strategic-plan/2009/nara-strategic-plan-2006-2016-final.pdf> (accessed 15 November 2011), viii, 2, 4.

65 Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, “Library and Archives Canada: 2011–2012 Report on Plans and Priorities,” <http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/rpp/2011-2012/inst/bal/bal01-eng.asp> (archived at <http://www.webcitation.org/6A6ktdn04> on 22 August 2012).

66 Mark Stevens, “Local Authority Archives: Places and Perceptions,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 20, no. 1 (April 1999): 85–86.

67 Magdalen College Archives, MS 825. Here, Macray is referring jestingly to a builder’s contract from the 1470s at Magdalen (Magdalen College Archives, MC:FA3/1/1F/1) in which William Waynflete demanded that windows in his new library should be as good as or better than similar windows in All Souls.

were luxuriant in their descriptions. All, however, fall short of the *General International Standard Archival Description (ISAD(G))*. Few catalogues use all twenty-six of *ISAD(G)*'s elements of description, but these catalogues rarely cover even the six mandatory fields.⁶⁸ The majority of entries give just reference number, scope and content, and date, with a title added in some cases. Creator and extent can usually be implied but are rarely stated.

What is most obviously missing is the level of description. As we have seen, these catalogues only really describe items. There is a higher level – best described as a sub-fonds – and this is generally a geographical description: usually a place, like Cropredy, but sometimes nothing more specific than a county. For these higher-level descriptions, the catalogues never give anything more than a title. *ISAD(G)* states that “the principle that archival description proceeds from the general to the specific is the practical consequence of the principle of respect des fonds.”⁶⁹ But the Oxford cataloguers tended to work from the specific to the general. They took all the specific items and sorted them into geographical categories, rather than identifying groups that reflect the organization and functions of the college (as the creating body), and then arranged the items within these. In doing so, they failed to realize that description, by rooting a document in its provenancial context, is a tool for preserving the authenticity of records, not just of providing access.

They are not alone. The latest edition of *Rules for Archival Description (RAD)* takes note of the findings of the Bentley research group by stating three purposes for archival description:

1. To provide access to archival material through retrievable descriptions;
2. To promote understanding of archival material by documenting its content, context and structure; and
3. To establish grounds for presuming the authenticity of archival material by documenting its chain of custody, arrangement, and circumstances of creation and use.⁷⁰

ISAD(G), however, sees the purpose of description as being only “to identify and explain the context and content of archival material in order to promote its accessibility.”⁷¹ Even *ISAD(G)* conceives of description primarily in terms of immediate access and ignores the importance of provenance.

68 International Council on Archives, *ISAD(G): General International Standard Archival Description*, 2nd ed. (2000), <http://www.ica.org/10207/standards/isadg-general-international-standard-archival-description-second-edition.html> (accessed 12 August 2012), 9.

69 *ISAD(G)*, 8.

70 Bureau of Canadian Archivists, *Rules for Archival Description (RAD)*, rev. version (2008), http://www.cdncouncilarchives.ca/RAD/RADComplete_July2008.pdf, xxii.

71 *ISAD(G)*, 7.

The consequences of this can be seen in our finding aids. All online catalogues now revolve around searching, though many do allow one to search on a reference number. A search will invariably bring up a list of hits, most of which will be at item level. Clicking on one will give the full description for that record. One can then click on “next record,” but this leads to the next record in the search results, not to the next record in the series. It may be more useful for the searcher, having found a record that interests him, to see other records around it rather than move to an unrelated record that may refer to a different person or place entirely. Such searching does not take users into the records but merely allows them to skim the surface. This trend has increased over the past decade. One might take as an example Access to Archives (A2A), a union catalogue to numerous records, mostly in British local record offices. As with most catalogues, when a search term is entered, A2A produces a list of jumbled item-level hits. However, when it was first developed a decade ago, it produced its results by series, listing each series in which a hit was found and thereby allowing the user to immediately understand the context of the items discovered.⁷² Now the series-level results are relegated to the side of the screen, and the greatest prominence is given to the jumbled item-level descriptions.⁷³

A recent report for Scottish Archival Network observed that “newer users expected a Google-style search whereas experienced users have learnt to understand the complex structures of catalogues.”⁷⁴ It is to accommodate such “newer users” that A2A and other catalogues have moved further toward the “Google-style” searching that divorces the content of hits from their context. When searching the catalogues of libraries and museums, it is possible to get immediate returns. However, the contextuality of archives has always meant that users have to put in a little more work to find what they are researching. Although in a Google-centred world inexperienced users may think that a simple search is what they want, we may be doing them a disservice by not helping them access the rest of our collections beyond the item-level hits they find. Indeed, searchers themselves seem to be aware of this: significantly, when the Public Record Office was introducing its catalogue in the 1990s, it included a function to allow browsing from reference number only because it

72 Sarah J.A. Flynn, Matthew Hillyard, and Bill Stocking, “A2A: The Development of a Strand in the National Archives Network,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 22, no. 2 (October 2001): 186–87.

73 The National Archives, Access to Archives, <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/a2a/default.aspx> (accessed 21 November 2011).

74 Julian Tomlin and Martin Bazley, “Development of Scottish Archives Online Report” (2009), <http://www.scoarch.org.uk/projects/scotlandonlineproject> (accessed 21 November 2011), 2.

was a “user suggested enhancement.”⁷⁵ Although The National Archives, and other services, give much advice on how to search their catalogues, they still do not draw attention to the browsing function.⁷⁶

Other catalogues make browsing impossible by failing to represent the hierarchical structure of their collections.⁷⁷ For example, the catalogue of the Slindon Manuscripts at West Sussex Record Office⁷⁸ provides a list of the collection at item/file level. However, there are no reference numbers attached, so anyone seeking a particular reference must count down from the top of the list or try to find the document by trial and error. Furthermore, the bundles in the collection have dates but no titles, despite the fact that most appear to refer to specific properties.

A search at the Washington State Archives produces a number of hits that do show where they fit into the hierarchy and what levels exist above them.⁷⁹ However, it is impossible to access these higher levels from this page, making it difficult to see what other items and files exist alongside them. To do so, one must go to another part of the Archive’s website to browse through the fonds.⁸⁰

The situation at the Archives of the London Borough of Hackney is even less clear. One can see, for example, that a paper by F.W. Baxter on the poet Thomas Gray is a file, but the description provides no indication of the series or fonds of which it is part.⁸¹ For other records it is possible. One can see that Baxter’s correspondence file for 1919–20 is part of the War Memorial Committee series from the Stoke Newington Fonds,⁸² but although it is possible to get a description of each of the levels (fonds, series, sub-series) above it,

75 Jone Garmendia, “User Input in the Development of Online Services: The PRO Catalogue,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 23, no. 1 (April 2002): 53.

76 The National Archives, “Help Section,” <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help/catalogue/basicsearch.htm#searchtips> (accessed 21 November 2011).

77 It is obviously somewhat invidious to give named examples, but we must do so. The examples are simply the first sites we encountered that illustrate the problems we are describing. We have chosen them for no other reason.

78 West Sussex Record Office, “Search Online,” Slindon Manuscripts, <http://www.westsussexpast.org.uk/searchonline/dserve.exe?dsqIni=Dserve.ini&dsqApp=Archive&dsqDb=Catalog&dsqCmd=NaviTree.tcl&dsqField=RefNo&dsqItem=SLINDON#HERE> (archived at <http://www.webcitation.org/6A5MES3Ma> on 21 August 2012).

79 Washington Secretary of State, “Washington State Archives,” http://www.sos.wa.gov/archives/search_results.aspx?q=burton®ion= (archived at <http://www.webcitation.org/6A5RNRrmw> on 21 August 2012).

80 Washington Secretary of State, “Washington State Archives,” http://www.sos.wa.gov/archives/archives_holdings.aspx?r=1 (archived at <http://www.webcitation.org/6A5RKbAfp> on 21 August 2012).

81 London Borough of Hackney, “Archives and Local History, Online Catalogue,” [http://www2.hackney.gov.uk/\(swin4y45ti0yqr55jv2xfirb\)/detail.aspx?parentpreref=110019192](http://www2.hackney.gov.uk/(swin4y45ti0yqr55jv2xfirb)/detail.aspx?parentpreref=110019192) (archived at <http://www.webcitation.org/6A5NDBTdX> on 21 August 2012).

82 London Borough of Hackney, “Archives and Local History, Online Catalogue,” [http://www2.hackney.gov.uk/\(swin4y45ti0yqr55jv2xfirb\)/detail.aspx?parentpreref=110011404](http://www2.hackney.gov.uk/(swin4y45ti0yqr55jv2xfirb)/detail.aspx?parentpreref=110011404) (archived at <http://www.webcitation.org/6A5NIo8K1> on 21 August 2012).

one cannot browse through these. It is impossible, therefore, to see what else may exist alongside this file.

These catalogues suggest that we may, once again, be in danger of seeing the content of a record as having greater significance than its context. In the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, the archivists in eight Oxford colleges were obsessed with making the records in their care accessible, thinking only about the convenience of users and not about the nature of the records. This encouraged them to prejudice content over context, and so they broke up records series in order to create catalogues that made it easier to identify individual documents but destroyed the archival bond between the documents. Our arrangement in the twenty-first century is much sounder, but our description, focused as it is on online databases, which give preference to searching for access points over browsing hierarchically, is again prejudicing the content of records over context, and treating documents as discrete items rather than part of a wider collection. Unlike our predecessors of a century and more ago, we must remember that access, as important as it is, is only useful if we retain the provenance of the records that places them in their proper context and secures their authenticity.