

Controlled Departures from Orthodoxy: Opening up History of Science Records

Clare Button: Project Archivist, Centre for Research Collections (CRC), University of Edinburgh (UE)



Louise Williams: Project Archivist, Lothian Health Services Archive (LHSA), CRC, UE



Two Wellcome Trust funded projects are using the Encoded Archival Description standard (EAD) to create finding aids that respond to the specialist characteristics of history of science records and meet the challenges that have acted as a barrier to their cataloguing in the past.

The *Towards Dolly* project is cataloguing records related to the history of animal genetics in Edinburgh. LHSA is creating a detailed catalogue to the case notes of Norman Dott (1897-1973), who developed neurosurgery as a medical specialism in Scotland.

Both projects open up previously inaccessible history of science records to new researchers. They depart from past cataloguing orthodoxies by using the flexibility of EAD to respond to the specialist nature of record form and content whilst ensuring interoperability through the use of thesauri indexing, authority files and data standards.



Cataloguing the records of animal genetics in Edinburgh:

- archival papers of zoologist James Cossar Ewart (1851-1933);
- archival papers of the Institute of Animal Genetics (early to mid C20th);
- archival papers of embryologist and geneticist Conrad Hal Waddington (1905-1975);
- archival and printed collections of the Roslin Institute and predecessor bodies (mid to late C20th);
- collection of c.4,000 glass positive slides showing a variety of subjects.



James Cossar Ewart with a Burchell's zebra used for hybrid experiments, c.1899

Challenges

Contextual

- Subject-specific interpretative issues – e.g. working genetics laboratory notebooks.
- Material where archival/acquisition history and context difficult to trace.
- Complicated interrelationships of bodies and organisations, essential to build picture of name changes and mergers for accurate cataloguing.

Technical

- Legacy issues: unsorted or 'reorganised' material, archival material previously catalogued as library manuscripts – need to unravel to make 'EAD-ready'.
- 'Recycling' and improving existing EAD files from legacy systems.
- Variety of media with different cataloguing needs: e.g. archival papers, grey literature, medals, photographs, glass slides.
- Subject indexing – what level of detailed terminology to use?

Solutions

- Encoded Archival Context (EAC) and authorities indexing to build biographical/contextual picture of animal genetics in Edinburgh.
- Co-operation with colleagues in the University's genetics community: interpretation, advocacy and 'oral history' to provide informed catalogue entries.
- Flexible use of EAD generation to accommodate variety of media: printed material (<oxyen/>), archival papers (<oxyen/>), glass slides (Access database, for later conversion to EAD).
- Subject indexing: keep it simple but informed' – 'lessons learned' approach from previous project, *Navigational Aids for the History of Science, Technology and the Environment* (NAHSTE, 2002).
- EAD used as an interoperative research tool through 'linkability' by:
 1. innovating a virtual map of related collections worldwide to fill out 'absences' in collections material – i.e. prominent figures whose papers are not extant, such as F.A.E Crew (1886-1973) can be traced through 'letters received' in other collections (e.g. Lancelot Hogben at Cambridge University Library);
 2. linking with UK-wide partner organisations in the Wellcome Trust Foundations of Modern Genetics Programme.



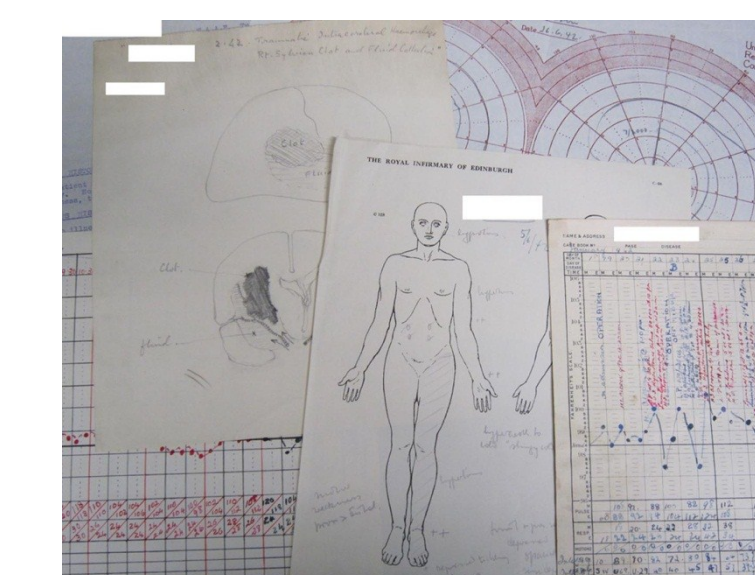
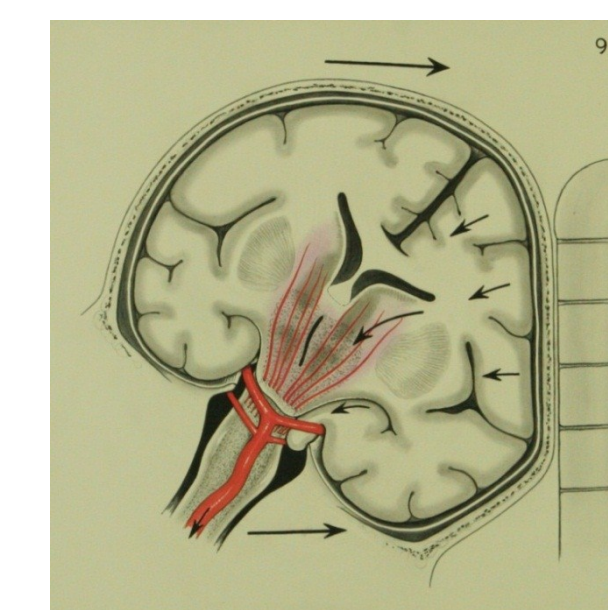
Various images from the archival collections

Cataloguing Norman Dott's Neurosurgical Case Notes (1920-1960)

Most modern folder-based patient case notes are catalogued to series-level only. Legislative access restrictions, technical terminologies and volume of records leave medical humanities, clinical and genealogical researchers without a 'way in' to these rich resources.

The project (without known precedent in UK medical archives) is producing an online, item-level finding aid to over 26,000 folder-based case notes created by Norman Dott. It will feature:

- an individual catalogue entry for each patient folder;
- search functions and descriptions designed in response to user need and characteristics of personal health records (PHRs);
- measures that keep patient personal data confidential whilst allowing a 'gateway' into 'open' information.



A teaching sketch used by Dott and an example of the range of documents in a case note folder (personal details redacted)

Challenges

- The Data Protection Act (1998) and the Records Management: NHS Code of Practice (Scotland) Version 2.1 (2012) cover most of the case notes.
- Catalogue terminologies – Should 'historical' medical terminology or modern thesauri terms be used? Interpretation of medical data in catalogue descriptions should be avoided e.g. imposition of diagnoses.
- Selecting suitable search criteria for online finding aid across many folders with varying record forms.

Planning

A ten-week scoping and research period included:

- consultation with stakeholders in archive cataloguing and researcher communities;
- creation of a hypothetical item-level catalogue entry.
- time planning, including scope for disseminating digital cataloguing skills through co-operation with the CRC volunteer and internship programme;
- identification of appropriate index and description terms allowing for 'archive' and contemporary terminologies.

Solving project challenges with EAD

- Attributes with appropriate protection of background encoding enable identifying data to be hidden from unauthorised users (authorised after successful application to NHS Lothian Health Records Manager).
- Data specific to PHRs (e.g. medical condition) can be marked-up for user search by modern terms and expressed in ways sympathetic to original records in different elements.
- Authority files and thesauri indexing 'link' across records and collections.
- Custom index terms achieve balance between patient privacy and user access in public catalogue.
- Methodologies can be exported, providing a strong foundation for future projects within LHSA and across medical archives sector.

EAD enables the creation of a tailored finding aid that respects the specific characteristics of modern archival PHRs and the needs of their researchers, 'opening up' these under-used and specialist records to new audiences.

Conclusions

The use of EAD in two very different history of science projects has led to the creation of finding aids that respond both to the characteristics of specialist records and to the needs of researchers. Both projects have created 'customised' catalogues that build context, allow detailed user searches and ensure the confidentiality of 'closed' data, overcoming barriers to cataloguing difficulties that have made these complex records largely inaccessible in the past. In its ability to extend a high level of control over metadata, EAD allows archivists to respond to the individual idiosyncrasies of specialist record types whilst ensuring general interoperability in its adherence to international data standards and orthodoxies.



Find Us!

Towards Dolly

Blog: www.towardsdolly.wordpress.com

Twitter: @towardsdolly



Dott Project/LHSA

Blog: lhasa.blogspot.co.uk/

FB: www.facebook.com/lhasa.edinburgh

Twitter: @lhasaaul

Towards Dolly: Clare Button: clare.button@ed.ac.uk

Dott Project: Louise Williams: louise.williams@ed.ac.uk

The CRC acknowledges the generous support of the Wellcome Trust