

INFORMATION PROJECT GROUP AT THE NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM

Benjamin Booth

National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London SE10 9NF*

Introduction

This group was set up in April 1984 to improve the documentation in the museum. This paper describes its aims and the progress which has been made in the first year. In addition it outlines the initial planning and survey, the methods which are being employed and the resources which are required. It also looks towards future problems and the resources which will be required to overcome them.

Definition of aims

Initially an attempt was made to define the aim of the IPG. This can be broadly summarised as the production of a record for each object in the museum, within a finite time, provisionally 5 years. At the moment only a small proportion, about 14%, of the collections are catalogued. What should go into each record, and the means by which this should be accomplished, were not at first clear. The precise definition of this aim is only now becoming settled. Two strands have emerged from the first year: the Management Record and the museum-wide Activities which are required to create and maintain this record.

The management record

Once the IPG had been assembled the various limitations which would effect its work became apparent. In particular these were the numbers of people available, finance and accommodation, all of which were on a smaller scale than had originally been planned. An arbitrary figure of 8 years was fixed for the completion of the project. Realistic estimates of the work required could be made once it had been established by surveys that the collections amounted to 1.4 million objects.

Eventually an appreciation of these constraints led us towards the construction of records which would enable the collections to be secured, controlled and administered. It was felt that we should first direct our efforts towards the physical collections, rather than the museum's information resources, which are also considerable. The record would not contain lengthy verbal descriptions, although this necessitated a photograph being made of each object for which this was appropriate. Additional information could be added by curators at a later date. The record would consist of information on the following:

- Identification
- Acquisition
- Location
- Conservation state
- Description
- Photographic negative number

In practice some of these categories have become mandatory, and others are

Additionally there was a survey of written enquiries to the museum. This survey provided a guide to which collections are currently in demand. However it should be noted that poorly documented collections get few enquiries because people are not aware of their extent.

Structure

Experience with the PETREL project showed that curators working on documentation projects within departments were often diverted to other more immediately important tasks. It was felt that if the work was to be completed in a finite period then curators should be spending all or most of their time on project work. The controversial solution of secondment to IPG was decided on as a means of accomplishing this.

Central to the IPG are teams of curators who go out into the museum to undertake documentation tasks. These teams consist of a leader, who might be seconded to the IPG for several years, and members, who would typically be seconded for the length of a particular task, or up to six months. Secondment of curators is crucial for the functioning of the group, as it allows a number of knowledgeable individuals to be drawn into the group, at no extra cost to the museum. This has proved to be an unpopular method of staffing. The departments tend to see their staff as lost and some curators dislike having their normal routine disrupted. However, curators who are involved in the programme acquire a much broader knowledge of the museum than they would otherwise have done. They are able to return to their departments with new skills.

In addition to strictly curatorial teams there is a group which deals with the museum's non-object related information resources and a team which deals with activities, 'the mess in the middle'. These were identified during the survey as being essential for the successful maintenance of documentation.

Two technical teams support the curatorial teams. One is responsible for the running of computers, software and so forth. A second team works with the curatorial teams to set up systems for documentation. This team includes a person who oversees standards and conventions, to ensure standardisation within projects and between projects.

The various parts of the IPG contain a wide variety of expertise and experience. It is most important that these resources can be blended together to make an effective mixture. This is an area of our operation which is currently under consideration.

Selection of projects

It was apparent that some projects left over from the PETREL programme needed completing. In view of the limited resources available the list of potential new projects had to be put into priority order. The following aspects were examined for each collection:

Collection organisation and documentation:

Large, disorganised and poorly documented collections would require attention first

Collection use and current demand:

Important collections, frequently consulted, would require attention

first

Resources required to catalogue:

Availability of space and staff would make a collection a more attractive documentation project

Museum wide activities and procedures:

Collections for which there are not established procedures for documentation, acquisition, numbering and so forth would have a high priority

These factors were quantified for each collection. The collections were then arranged in priority order. For practical reasons the selection of projects was not entirely straightforward. It was not considered to be practical to have more than one project active in one department at one time. It was considered best to complete first some projects which were already well advanced.

A curator has been assigned to the Activities project, although the precise resources to be allocated to it have yet to be decided.

A further area which has been recognised as useful for all projects is the Acquisition data contained in the museum records. A team has been formed to extract the data on acquisitions, so that this can be amalgamated with the object records. It is hoped that this will save time in researching acquisition data for individual projects, although it is likely to take a year or more to cover the whole collection. It may be necessary to put more resources into this project so that it is of use to other IPG projects sooner.

Decision making and coordinating

After deciding on priorities for projects, discussions have been held with departments on the desirability and practicality of carrying out these projects. Some initial fears and misunderstandings have mostly been overcome, although there are areas which are still proving to be difficult.

A body called the Review Committee has been established to ensure that, at the design stage, projects benefit from the collective knowledge of the group and do not diverge from its central principles. This committee consists of the curatorial team leaders, the technical teams and the head of the group. Having discussed and agreed a proposal for a project a partnership of curatorial team leader and systems analyst are assigned to the project to develop the idea further, whilst continuing a dialogue with the department.

Having been discussed by the review committee a proposal for a project would then be approved by the IPG policy committee. This body consists of the Director and Assistant Director of the Museum, the Heads of the Curatorial Departments, the Head of the Enquiry Service and representatives of the IPG.

Once a project has been approved in principle the Team Leader and Systems Analyst will set up the project, with help from the terminology and activities experts. They report regularly to the Review Committee. This partnership continues until the project becomes active. The team leader takes on the responsibility for the successful completion of the project with assistance, when required, from the systems analyst.

In order to coordinate the distribution of resources to projects and to monitor

not applicable to all collections. There is a tendency in some projects to expand the record by putting in lengthy descriptions. This is discouraged.

Activities

In order for these records to be compiled and maintained it became apparent that a number of procedures were required. The survey of collections showed several areas where the museum procedures were either inadequate, or lacking. These are presently identified as:

- Acquisition procedures
- Record photography
- Location recording
- Movement control
- Object numbering
- Object marking

The approach which has been adopted in the short term is to define where these inadequacies affect a specific project. In the long term it will be necessary to design and enforce museum-wide procedures. It is likely that, with sufficient funding and political will, a Registrar's Department will be established.

Position within the National Maritime Museum

In addition to administrative and service departments, the museum consists of five curatorial departments, which deal with specific areas of the museum's interests. Latterly more emphasis has been placed on functions which cut across the traditional departmental boundaries of the museum. Specific groups have been set up to attend to these functions. The first of these to be formed, several years ago, was the Conservation department. Others are now planned or active. The IPG is one of these.

A small information retrieval team had been established previously in the museum. The PETREL program, which started in 1976, conducted a survey of the collections and had made progress in a number of areas. When the IPG was formed there were a number of such projects which needed to be brought to a satisfactory conclusion.

Developments during the first 12 months of IPG

Surveys

In order to assess the scale and range of the task ahead, the first project undertaken by the group was to conduct a survey of the collections. In all 42 major collections were identified, amounting to 1.4 million objects. This figure had previously been variously estimated to be from under one million to several millions. The surveys did not examine the non-object related information resources of the museum.

The survey also helped to identify what has become known as the 'mess in the middle'. That is, activities which go on in the museum and effect most areas of the collections, but are currently not well defined or controlled. Included in these are: loans in and out, acquisitioning, object numbering and marking and location recording. It became apparent that the proper functioning of these systems would be essential if the work of the project was to succeed and be maintained in future years.

the progress of projects a small Coordinating Team has been formed. This team charts the progress of projects and makes sure that they are being adequately supported. In addition it can help with solving short term problems, by getting the right people together to discuss them. This mechanism is being set up at the moment. It is hoped that it will complement the Review Committee, whose main sphere is in the development rather than progress of projects.

Computing resources

The computing strategy is currently under review, but is likely to remain fairly stable because of financial constraints. Software for data capture is being tested. This includes a home grown programme called MAXARC and dBASE II. For the production of major catalogues and indices the GOS package is used. This has the advantage of being extremely powerful and flexible, but is difficult to use due to poor documentation. The current hardware configuration for the central computing facility consists of two multi-user Cromemco microcomputers, each based on a 68000 processor with a Megabyte of memory. These are augmented by several Epson QX10 microcomputers, which may be located in departments for cataloguing projects or in the IPG offices as required.

Conclusion

It is perhaps a little surprising that it has taken a year to get to the stage of knowing what we are trying to do. In part this has been due to uncertainty in resources and in part it has been due to the novelty of what we are trying to attempt. We have found it difficult to find model systems from elsewhere to adopt. Those we have found admitted to considerable problems.

The idea of assembling a Project Group, consisting largely of seconded curators, has proved to be mostly effective but unpopular. With hindsight it would have been more economical to have collected these staff after we had decided what we were doing, but they were necessary for the survey. A fair proportion of the ideas about the direction have come from the seconded curators. The review committee has been an important forum for sharing ideas at the development stage. It is hoped that the newly formed coordinating team will be able to steer projects to completion. In an organisation such as ours any project which cuts across departmental divisions is bound to meet with opposition.

Central to the plan now is the idea of the management record and the need to rationalise and implement museum-wide activities. The resultant management records will be of great use to curators, but will not really assist in answering public enquiries. Financial constraints will mean that direct access by the public to our data is still a long way off. If it is successful the activities project will have far reaching effects on the way in which the museum operates. In particular if a Registrar's post is established then it should be impossible for an object to enter the museum and become lost in the collections.

Much of what we are attempting is either new, or is being tried on a substantially larger scale than has been done before. Its success will depend on whether the Museum at large is ready for such an all-embracing scheme and whether the various elements which make up the IPG can be welded into an effective team.

*Current Address:

Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission, Fortress House
23 Savile Row, London W1X 2HE