UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Classification and Reclassification at the University of Birmingham

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The University of Birmingham Library adopted Library of Congress (LC) classification in November 1921. Almost a century later we are still using it for the majority of our collections. Next year we will be opening our new Library and one of the major projects in preparation for that move is an overhaul of our classification schema, including large scale reclassification to bring us up to a modern standard Library of Congress implementation. As we contemplate the new library we try to make the best decisions for our future users, whose needs are quite different from those anticipated by the Librarians of past decades.

In some respects our reclassification needs are triggered by changes in the world. New technologies, geo-political change and even the fashions within academia have shaped the expansion of the LC schedules and we have not had comprehensive ongoing reclassification to keep up with that change. Other triggers for reclassification have been caused by historic local policy.

In the original 1921 implementation the Library, led by Edward Henry Fenwick Mills, assigned LC classmarks both for newly acquired items and those already in the collections. It appears that they followed the schedules and the cuttering tables accurately and they swiftly classified their collection with numbers which can sit happily alongside modern counterparts in some cases. However, many numbers diverge from modern practice. By 1938 the Law Department's Library had been catalogued and classified, but the Library of Congress law schedule for English and Irish law was not published until 1973.[1]. An in-house K-KZ schedule was created to solve the problem. Even when the schedules were eventually published the in-house version was retained, presumably because it was a bespoke solution for our collection and to avoid reclassification. It was only replaced in 2011 when, after an assessment of available systems, we reclassified our law books using the Moys Classification and Thesaurus for Legal Materials.[2]

There were also many minor ways in which we had locally modified the schedules and retained those changes until recent years. Most were not documented, but one example mentioned in Dr Bonser's 1938 Decennial Librarian's report was the art schedule: *"The Library of Congress classification for painting was found to be inadequate and was revised for the purpose."* [3] The revisions in art are still visible on the shelves – one of many changes made was the expansion of ND (painting) to incorporate many items which ought strictly to be placed elsewhere.

Under the librarianship of Dr Bonser, between 1929 and 1952, the classification culture was innovative. Where schedules did not work for our collection they were ruthlessly chopped or padded out. There was no harm to their users, because they lived in a time when there was less expectation for libraries to run on comparable classification systems. Many libraries were still using local schemes or shelving numbers, so it could only be an asset to University of Birmingham users to have a system adjusted to show off the strengths of the collection. At some point over the decades that followed the culture changed from one of innovation to one which valued internal consistency over all else. In some ways this was a benefit to our users, who could find things where they were accustomed to, but it was a particular disservice to students of expanding areas of study, whose books were piled into one number despite the Library of Congress having moved the books into a new expanded range. In recent years we tried to address this in small ways, but with limited resource we could barely scratch the surface. In areas where we had drastically adjusted the schedules it was particularly difficult to accommodate change.

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[1] LIBRARY OF CONGRESS (2013) Historical notes, p. 4. In: *Classification and shelflisting manual* [Online]. Available from: http://www.loc.gov/aba/publications/FreeCSM/historicalnotes.pdf [Accessed 15th August 2015].

[2] MOYS, E.M. (2001). *Moys Classification and Thesaurus for Legal Materials, 4th ed*. München: K.G. Saur.

[3] BONSER, W. (1939) Decennial Report 1938-1939. In: UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM *Librarian's Reports* [Typescript] Cadbury Research Library: Special Collections, University of Birmingham. University Heritage Archive UA 23B/19.

Other local practices had been applied across the board. By the mid-1940s the Library had stopped assigning shelving cutters. Cutters were still included where they were specified in the schedules, e.g. for the names of literary authors, geographic areas or "A-Z by subject", etc., but what we could think of as a main entry or filing cutter was omitted. This policy change does not seem to have been documented in any surviving records so we are left to speculate as to the causes. World War II seems a likely catalyst for the change. Staffing during the war was significantly depleted and a temporary cataloguer had to be hired in 1941 when the regular cataloguer left to serve. Demand on the library was high despite the reduced workforce. Leaving off the cutters would have saved time on classification, lettering spines and typing classmarks on index cards.

The library continued assigning only the subject portion of the classmark until some point in the 1970s or 80s. Unfortunately it has not yet been possible to narrow down this date range. The new policy introduced was that at the end of the number from the schedules, in place of the missing cutter, a single letter was assigned to assist in filing. This letter was the first letter of the main entry, and had the advantage of being quicker to assign and read than a full cutter. In the early days of this procedure the classmark was hand-written on the bookplate in ink, save for this single letter which was written in pencil, so it is known as the pencil letter. It seems likely that this policy change may have been influenced by the increasing size of the collection and the change in user habits which led to a marked increase in reshelving work.[4] A policy which made it easier to reshelve books in a prescribed order would have been an advantage.

As we assessed the shelves for the current reclassification the vast majority of items in our collections bore a pencil letter, significant numbers of which were retrospectively assigned (contributing to the challenge in dating this policy change from physical evidence). We called our classification Library of Congress but visually our numbers differed from the norm.

For example, our number might look like this: DA 600/M

In addition to the pencil letter you may notice the extra space between the initial letters and numbers. This was a stylistic choice apparently made early on but, again, if the decision was documented at the time those documents do not survive in the University Archive. For the 1920s and 30s Librarians and their staff, inserting a space to improve readability was a decision which could only aid their students and made no difference to Library staff. It was only when that space was transferred to computer cataloguing in that it began to be an occasional irritant. In a card catalogue the cards would file correctly whether the typist remembered to insert the space or not; to a human user it was largely irrelevant. Unfortunately for a computer there is a significant difference in filing classmarks with and without the space.

These two local stylistic differences from standard practice were valid and helpful choices when made by our predecessors, but now, finding ourselves now in a global environment where we have the facility to copy and paste classmarks from digital schedules, import classmarks through shelf-ready or derive classmarks from cataloguing cooperatives, these differences set us apart. Even as early as 1976 it was noted in the Birmingham Libraries Co-operative Mechanisation Project's Final Report that "As Birmingham University's Library of Congress classification practice includes many local variations, i.e. an LC class number in a BNB or LC MARC record cannot be accepted in most cases, it is found that the presence of a MARC record only speeds the overall cataloguing/classification time by some 25%."[5] Planning a substantial reclassification project in the present day we had to consider departing from historic practices.

Due to the 2.7 million items in our collection and the extreme time constraints imposed by needing to do the majority of the reclassification within the 2015 summer break (in preparation for decanting to the new Library in summer 2016) it was an enormous project, so we had to look at outsourcing our classification. We knew early on that our business-as- usual staffing could not handle the vast amount of extra work which would

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[4.] The increase in shelving was first remarked upon in the 1969-70 Librarian's report and expanded upon the in the report of the following year where it was identified as a changing pattern of usage. HUMPHRIES, K.W. (1970, 1971) Librarian's Report 1969-1970 & 1970-1971. In: UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM. (1921-1975) *Minutes of the Library Committee* [Typescript] Cadbury Research Library: Special Collections, University of Birmingham. University Archives UA 17/i.

[5.] BIRMINGHAM LIBRARIES CO-OPERATIVE MECHANISATION PROJECT (1976) *Final report.* Birmingham: BLCMP, p. 23.

would include assigning classmarks, relabeling, changing classmarks on the system and reshelving; therefore outsourcing was necessary. We also knew that it can be difficult and expensive to get external suppliers to tailor classmarks to fit our collection and local style. It was time for us to move to standard LC classmarks and break with our in-house style.

With these initial decisions made, we arranged for OCLC to supply classmarks. We exported our bibliographic records to them, they matched them with their database and returned them with an extra classmark in a local field. The classmark provided was their most widely used LC classmark for that item. It was always expected that some records would not match with their catalogue, but we could expect a good hit rate.

In addition to the classmarks from OCLC, two work packages were tendered for: the production of the new labels and the physical reclassification work. Both were won by Backstage Library Works.[6]

Funding was not limitless, so we had to focus on the areas where there would be most benefit to our users. In the new library our collections will be rearranged in two sections: a high use collection of ca. 300,000 items and a research annex containing research material and the more specialist items. It made sense to focus reclassification attention on the high demand items, and within that on the areas where real change was needed. We exempted several classmark ranges because there would be little change, and others to preserve desirable practices, e.g. the Moys classmarks for K items. In some areas we found that the numbers from OCLC were unsuitable for us, e.g. obsolete classmark ranges. For example, HM1-299 was declared obsolete in 1999.[7] It is not surprising that many of the older books on these subjects still have these numbers as the dominant ones on OCLC, but clearly we do not want invest any time or money in reclassifying to obsolete numbers. Areas like this will have to be tackled manually as a "mop up" exercise after the bulk of the work is done.

Adopting "standard modern" LC was not without its challenges. As not everything is being reclassified, cutter numbers and pencil letters will have to interfile, both on the shelves and on our systems; a challenge for staff in both areas. We will have some classmarks with our extra space in and new numbers without, necessitating systems work to improve filing issues. New local policy for classification must be established, communicated and documented, and training needs identified for staff across the Library, many of whom had not worked with standard LC cutters before.

Owing to the large number of externally provided classmarks, we are aware that not every number will be ideal, unique and file perfectly with the others. We accept this situation and still expect it to be an improvement on our previous position. With the decision made that occasionally externally supplied classmarks will not be unique, we decided that in the future for business-as-usual classification by our own staff while we would prefer to use unique numbers, we accept that in some cases it is not essential.

This led to the decision that we would not use publication dates at the end of the majority of our classmarks as they make the numbers longer (and therefore more challenging for our users) and apart from contributing to uniqueness we consider they do not add much value in most cases. For this reason we removed the dates from the OCLC supplied numbers and will use them sparingly at cataloguer's discretion in the future, mainly on well-known literary works.

With the move to the new library we are working towards a situation in which the high use items will all be in the same part of the same building rather than in various sequences in a number of different locations (as was previously the case). This will make it much easier to resist any pressures to put a book in a certain classmark range just so that it will shelve in a certain location. We hope to depart from the situation described by B.M. Bland in 1955: "The cataloguer who tries to be 'purist' in his approach to classification of University

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[6] http://www.bslw.com/

[7] LIBRARY OF CONGRESS *Classification outline* [Online] Available from: http://classificationweb.net/ [Accessed: 15 Aug. 2015].

material, is rudely awakened by the criticisms of the academic staff. [8]

We hope that in the new library we will be able to assign the best possible number for the book, resulting in a truer subject arrangement on the shelves to the benefit of all users. There will be many challenges during the project and the move to the new building but it will be a great relief to be able to classify without needing to use a combination of official schedules, local schedules, various spreadsheets and our catalogue to assign a single number. It will be wonderful to use the full range of modern numbers available to help our 21st century users find resources arranged in an up to date manner. When our predecessors tailored the schedules to the specific local needs of their students and academics they could not have envisioned the modern uses for metadata in the global environment, nor the natures of our current collection. Like them, we try to do the best for our users and our collection. Unlike them, we need to achieve this within a global information community.

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