This article assumes the reader has prior experience of indexing books. If you've not then read Nancy C. Mulvany's *Indexing Books* (University of Chicago Press 2005) which will get you up to speed as it's an excellent text book. With one exception – none of her advice relates to indexing local interest books.

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'A funny lot': Indexing local history books

Bob Trubshaw

Abstract

The indexes of local history books are likely to be used by people researching specific interests. Unlike more general books, passing references to people, places and events need to be indexed, perhaps under appropriate general headings. This article offers advice on anticipating the interests and 'technical knowledge' of index users.'

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People who read local history books are a funny lot. Well, to avoid a large number of libel claims, I had better qualify that remark: they are a 'funny lot' compared to the readers of many other books. While they might possibly have an interest in the broad theme of the book – say a village history – in practice they are probably trying to find out about a specific individual, building or event.

So they are less book 'readers' than book 'users', frequently relying on the contents pages and the index. And, as some of you may have already realised, this interest in the more minor contents of a book makes them a seriously 'funny lot' from the perspective of an indexer. Whereas in most books there would be little point in indexing minor mentions of individuals, buildings and street names, this would be

very frustrating for local and family history researchers because it is just such 'trivial' aspects which they are often most keen to track down, or which are the only clues to locating more relevant information.

I will readily admit to being one of this 'funny lot' myself, having spent the last two decades researching aspects of Leicestershire and Rutland history. In addition, for the last fifteen years I have also been publishing books, booklets and CD-ROMs about a wide range of specialist topics. Along the way I have compiled numerous indexes – authors of local history titles seem to be very happy to pass this 'chore' over to someone else, usually with the see-through excuse that they do not have the necessary experience!

The nature of local history titles makes it fairly easy to pick up the major themes as well as the specific details. Identifying synonyms and creating '*see also'* cross-references is also usually fairly straightforward. So far, so good as we are well within the realm of customary practice and common sense which applies to all indexing. However we are in a different realm when it comes to passing references to people, places and events which might understandably not be indexed in more general book simply because there is no discussion. But such casual or fleeting mentions may be exactly the clues that lead readers – or should that be 'users' – of local history books to the obscure nugget of information that adds to their research.

So in a village history I would index *every* reference to:

- personal names

- street names

- significant buildings

- community celebrations (e.g. street parties for coronations, royal jubilees, armistices, etc.)

- seasonal customs (e.g. Christmas, Bonfire Night, etc)

With personal names be alert to the same forename being shared by several members of the same family. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century expect to find three or four successive Johns, Williams or Thomases. Try hard to keep them separate in the index and preferably list them by dates of birth and death (e.g. **Brown, John (c.1745–98); Brown, John (1775–1843); Brown, John (1804–11)** rather than, say, **Brown, John (I); Brown, John (II); Brown, John (III)** etc. However, if the author has used this rather impersonal nomenclature you may want to consider **Brown, John (II) (1775–1843)**. Some of these individuals may have been given nicknames in their lifetime, so should be listed as **Brown, John 'Jim'**. Some local history authors may distinguish multiple individuals with the same name by inventing nicknames, such as 'John the publican', and in this case these monikers may also need to be included in the index entry.

Watch out too for women who appear under both their maiden and married name; or who marry again. A similar situation can arise with buildings – not only in recent decades do public houses change name – and suitable cross-references will also be needed. Decide whether you are indexing either under '**public houses**' or '**inns**' (you will find it difficult to know whether the 'Rose and Crown' was really an inn, a public house, or merely a 'beer house') and cross-reference the two headings e.g. as '**inns – *see* public houses and inns**'.

With books which deal with the history of towns and cities there may be multiple references to public officials, such as the mayor – even though a different individual may be holding office each time the post is mentioned. Creating an index entry for '**Mayor**' (perhaps with a cross-reference to '**Lord Mayor**' if the town is awarded city status) or '**Chief Constable**' (with a cross-reference from '**Police**') may benefit someone interested in the place's political history and public officials.

Deciding what entry to create for some topics can be tricky. For example, the Society of Change Ringers should of course appear under their full name as '**Society of Change Ringers**'. However cross-references from '**change ringing**' (for the pedantic) and '**bell ringing**' (for the lay person) are also needed. With specific events linked to major national or international events – such as village celebrations to celebrate the end of the siege of Mafeking; someone who returned from fighting in the Battle of the Somme; or a description of living in London during the Blitz – you may want to index under the specifics (e.g. Mafeking, Somme, London, Blitz) but a more general entry such as '**Boer War**', '**First World War**' etc is also necessary.

The exception would be if a large part of the book discusses, say, the Second World War.

Among the books I have indexed and published are two with subject matter verging on the 'obsessive' – a detailed history of early cinemas in Leicester, and the life and patents of a nineteenth century inventor of agricultural equipment. The indexes to these books therefore include references to the trade names of ciné projectors and the technical terminology for steam ploughs, as their readers are likely to include experts in the history of such artefacts. I have yet to index a book devoted to aircraft, railway locomotives, trams or such items which are identified by both a model and a serial number. However, unless the structure of the book itself includes a detailed list by serial number, then the dubious pleasure of indexing by serial numbers (both individual e.g. **12345** and sequential e.g. **12341–50**) may be greatly appreciated by the users of such books.

In such 'obsessive' books about specific topics the authors will often draw upon books and periodicals which themselves are of historic interest. Unless there are large numbers of references to the same magazine or newspaper then I recommend creating index entries under the title of the publication. However these are the sort of entries which could be deleted if the publisher decides the index is too long.

I have my own obsessive interests too and these include traditional wells and springs. My preference is to see them listed under '**wells**' (even if it is called something like 'Caudell Spring') but a cross-reference to '**springs**' is necessary (even it is called 'St Mary's Well'). The cause of this confusion goes back to the Old English word *wella* which originally had the sense of the modern word 'spring' but evolved into the modern English word 'well', with its connotations less of a spring and more of a lined shaft.

Another obsession, which I share with a good many researchers, encompasses so-called 'folk customs'. A collective entry such as '**customs, seasonal**' which cross-refers to entries for, say, '**Boxing Day**', '**harvest festivals**', '**May Day**', '**rush bearing**', '**Shrovetide football**' and whatever is especially useful as it saves hunting through the whole index looking for all the possible customs. However watch out for other customs – for example, morris dancing – which have lost their original seasonal associations. If the book makes reference to local or family customs at birthdays, Christmas, weddings, christenings and funerals then also create an entry.

Unlike many other books, almost all local history publications can be expected to become increasingly valuable in the future. What is common knowledge to someone alive now will have become rather quaint by the time they die, and will turn into a useful historical resource a decade or three later. Local history books are often written by people who have reached the stage in their lives where their 'common knowledge' is becoming somewhat 'quaint'. Some years later the full value of their efforts will be appreciated – or not, if the index is too poor to allow the information to be readily accessed. Bear in mind that, more so than with most books, preparing indexes for local history publications requires not just thinking in terms of what someone today might want to research, but trying to anticipate the interests of future researchers.

This article cannot be comprehensive as the index of every book will raise unique issues, and local history titles are likely to score fairly highly on idiosyncrasies. However I hope to have helped you to think a little more like the 'funny lot' who are likely to use the indexes of such books.