Borthwick Institute for Archives

History of Collections Information

This guide supplements the Collections Information Policy, giving an account of the development of the provision of finding aids at the Borthwick and the current approach to the preparation of finding aids. The outline history of the Borthwick adds context and detail to this guide.

Pre-Borthwick indexes and handlists (1855-1953)

The history of creating public finding aids to archives at the Borthwick predates the foundation of the Borthwick by over a century. James Raine published his first volume of edited wills from the York Probate Registry as Testamenta Eboracensia in 1836, with subsequent volumes in the series in 1855, 1864, 1869, 1884 and 1902. The first edition of an Archbishops' Register came in 1872, with subsequent editions published from 1904 onwards by the Surtees and Canterbury and York Societies, respectively.

More detailed probate indexing occurred between 1888 and 1937. New editors of different sources appeared early in the twentieth century. Various other selected texts and record series in the Archdiocesan archive were published over the early part of the 20th century by both the Surtees Society and Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series, including the 'Fasti Parochiales' guides to clerical appointments in the Diocese, which were published from the 1930s to 1980s.

Canon John Purvis was appointed York Diocesan archivist in 1939 and immediately began sorting and describing the records he found there. Working in extremely difficult circumstances, he produced many handlists and indexes to aid researchers. He worked extensively on ecclesiastical cause papers, producing several handwritten volumes over

an extended period.

Indexing at the Borthwick (1953-onwards)

The Borthwick Institute opened in 1953, with Canon Purvis as its first Director. Purvis published an overall guide to the archive with its first classification scheme in The Archives of York Diocesan Registry (1952). The Leverhulme Trust funded a History of the Diocesan Courts between 1955 and 1962. In November 1962, Purvis issued a two-volume 'Classified Subject Index' to the holdings he had accumulated in St Anthony's Hall. This work helped to establish the main lines of our house style and approach to arrangement and description for the next 20 years.

Subsequent archivists began a card index of place names, supplemented by a card index of maps, still available in the searchroom.

In the 1960s and 1970s, arrangement and description work proceeded steadily. Decisions about which archives to work on and how to arrange and describe them were pragmatic, following demand and staff/researcher interests.

In the early 1970s, a complete re-classification of the York Diocesan Archive was undertaken, moving from the system devised by Canon Purvis to a functional arrangement. We published our first overall guide to our collections, A Guide to the Archive Collections in the Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, in 1973, supplemented by A Handlist of Parish Register Transcripts in the Borthwick Institute of Historical Research (1976). Shorter handlists and indexes were issued as Borthwick Lists and Indexes.

Volunteers from the York and District Family History Society indexed Marriage Bonds, contributed to the National Burials Index, edited parish registers for the Yorkshire Parish Register Society, and indexed patient records from hospital archives. Members of the U3A produced A Place Index to the Visitation Court Books of the Archdeacon of York 1598-1836. Thanks to the work of many staff and volunteers, we now have a complete list of Clergy Ordinations in the Archdiocese from 1350 to 1850.

By the early 21st century and the introduction of international archival standards, many of our finding aids met the mandatory elements, but most did not. Since the publication of ISAD(G), we have striven to apply at least the mandatory elements to the new finding aids we create, and many of these finding aids are fully compliant with the standard. There remains, however, a backlog of finding aids that, while they work well enough as a guide to the contents of their respective archives, are not fully compliant with the standard. We have a regular programme of upgrading non-compliant finding aids balanced with the requirement to create finding aids for archives for which we have nothing other than fonds-level information. Up-to-date information about what we're doing to upgrade our finding aids can be found in our Collections information Plan.

Early electronic lists were created as WordPerfect (and later, Word) files. We initially adopted a stand-alone, on-prem version of Axiell CALM as our collections information management platform, using it to create new finding aids and implementing it as a tool for creating finding aids and managing our accessions records.
In the late 1990s, we opened negotiations with British Origins to make thousands of

marriage bond and probate indexes available online. When British Origins was taken over by FindMyPast, over a million entries relating to Borthwick records were transferred, too. We also worked to add other lists to online platforms, with a major project from 2005-2011 to create an online, searchable database of index data and images for our Cause Papers.

This project was followed by Archbishops Registers Revealed (2015-2021), which, with funding from the Andrew W Mellon Foundation, imaged all the registers from 1225-1649 and the first two Institution Act Books. Funding from the Marc Fitch Fund and the AHRC produced associated searchable index data for 1306-1405 and 1538-1650.

Our third major imaging project (completed in March 2017) relied on having a full finding aid in EAD, which was hosted on Borthcat (see below for Borthcat). The digitisation of a large part of the Retreat Archive produced nearly 680,000 images linked to finding aid entries through the Wellcome Library, which funded the project.

In the mid-2010s, the Borthwick helped to form a consortium of Yorkshire Record Offices holding parish registers and bishops' transcripts. The consortium negotiated a deal with Find My Past to digitise the records, index them, and make them available online. There are several million individual entries from Borthwick records from 1306 - 1858 (probate), 1538 - 1920 (parish registers), and 1558 - 1880 (bishops' transcripts) now available online. This approach was continued, adding the same content (re-imaged) to Ancestry.co.uk from 2021 onward.

Current position

We implemented AtoM (Access to Memory) in January 2015 for accessions data, and the public interface of AtoM, Borthcat, was launched in April 2016. From 2015 to 2017, we undertook a funded, large-scale retroconversion project (Genesis) to add fonds-level descriptions to Borthcat and selected full-level catalogues. Since 2016, all of our new cataloguing has been added to Borthcat, and we have ceased the production of new paper handlists and finding aids. We now host over 131,500 entries on Borthcat, with an ongoing rolling programme of retroconverting paper-only lists to searchable format.

In 2021, we adopted the 'finding aids as software' approach, allowing us to add box lists to Borthcat as an initial stage of making collection information available online.

We prioritise arrangement and description through our Collections Development Group, which considers new finding aids for archives with only fonds-level descriptions and improvements to existing finding aids. We send information about new archives and additions to existing archives to Discovery through the annual survey conducted by the National Register of Archives, and we make our descriptions available for harvesting by the Archives Hub and by Archives Portal Europe.