

Slow, slow, quick, quick, slow – retrospective conversion at the University of Nottingham

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The University of Nottingham started to automate its catalogue in 1984 and went live with online circulation and a microfiche catalogue generated from MARC records in 1986. For the first eleven years, the main focus of work was on supporting online circulation, getting as much as possible of the stock which would be borrowed (or retrospectively, which had been presented at issue desks) on to the computerised system.

Throughout this time, the majority of the retroconversion was done without the item in hand. Barcodes were stuck into items, key details noted on sheets, and records subsequently downloaded. As it was not possible to devote much time to checking the accuracy of the records, they were tagged as “unchecked” and the paper records continued to be regarded as the “true” catalogue record. Accordingly, all this material continued to be part of the retroconversion burden.

Systematic, complete retroconversion was scarcely dreamed of. There were certain areas where it was done – notably, if a new edition of a title was bought, all previous editions were added to the computerized catalogue. A principle was also established that we would not amend paper records – so if an item was to be moved to a different location, then it would be recatalogued, the cards removed from the card catalogue and the binder-slip (master paper record) taken out of its binder.

In 1995 about 100 items per month were still being barcoded at issue desks. However, we took the decision to stop working without the items in hand. (The paper records did not include pagination, and in some instances lacked publisher or series information so could not be relied upon as source information, even when the retroconversion work was undertaken by cataloguers.) In future, all “barcode-on-issue” items were to be captured on return from loan and they, along with any other items noted on the binder-slips would be given full cataloguing. So at last we were stopping adding to the sum of unchecked records on our system and had begun to reduce the existing backlog of records to be checked.

At this point, we quantified the retrospective cataloguing needed for arts, social sciences and special collections (the only areas for which we had the binder-slips at that time) – and it came to roughly 250,000 records. A proposal submitted to the Library Senior Management Team for a retrospective cataloguing project was unsuccessful – but the team took on individual areas which they were interested in to work on systematically in any available time. With time, we developed a system of giving each team member protected time for their project work. We drew up a “church-roof-fund”-style chart with a space for each binder and calculated that at the then rate of progress, the work would be completed by 2025!

A great impetus to retrospective cataloguing came from the Follett reportⁱ and subsequent call for project proposals. The University of Nottingham put in a number of bids to work on printed and archival collections. Two printed special collections were funded: Briggs Collection of Educational Literature and Cambridge Drama Collection.

These total about 3700 volumes – but necessitated significantly more catalogue records because of the number of analytical records involved.

An opportunity had already been taken to devote a member of staff to starting work on retrospective conversion of our East Midlands Collection for a while. Soon after, a second, temporary post was created for retrospective conversion. This was marvellous – but unfortunately the work we chose to undertake, official government publications in our Documents Division, had not been included in our quantification as there were no binder-slips – so this work, although extremely useful and a high priority, did nothing to reduce our target figure.

The decision by the University to open a new library for Computer Science, Business and Education on the new campus it was developing (Jubilee Campus) meant that we had an urgent need for retrospective conversion on a significant scale. We seconded a team member to work on the project full time and recruited a library assistant to work with her – and, having completed the work within the available time, also had the satisfaction that for the first time certain areas of library stock were fully catalogued in the online catalogue.

A second national initiative followed in the form of the Research Support Libraries Programme. The resulting projects enabled us to complete the cataloguing or retro-cataloguing of 5000 music scores (Ensemble), 13,000 theology titles (Revelation), 3,700 mining reports (Mine of Information) and 3,000 Icelandic or Old Norse titles (EGIL). Britain in Print, a Heritage Lottery Fund supported project around the same time, facilitated the retroconversion of the 1200 earliest British imprints in our holdings. Alongside these projects the team was also involved in a project to retroconvert the catalogue of the University's Adult Education Library, which was now to be absorbed into the University Library.

After this period of frenetic activity, progress was slowed by internal upheavals. Whereas hitherto the Cataloguing Team had been responsible only for bibliographic description, and classification and processing were undertaken in the branches, a review of library processes had recommended the centralization of classification and processing. Over the period of a year, we changed the way work is divided up – and gradually took on the classification of each subject area. Shortly after, the section was relocated to the University's new King's Meadow Campus a mile from University Park. The provision of a cataloguing hot desk in the arts and social sciences library (Hallward Library) made it possible to continue the retroconversion work in an efficient way and team members are able to schedule themselves to work in Hallward as workflows and team priorities allow.

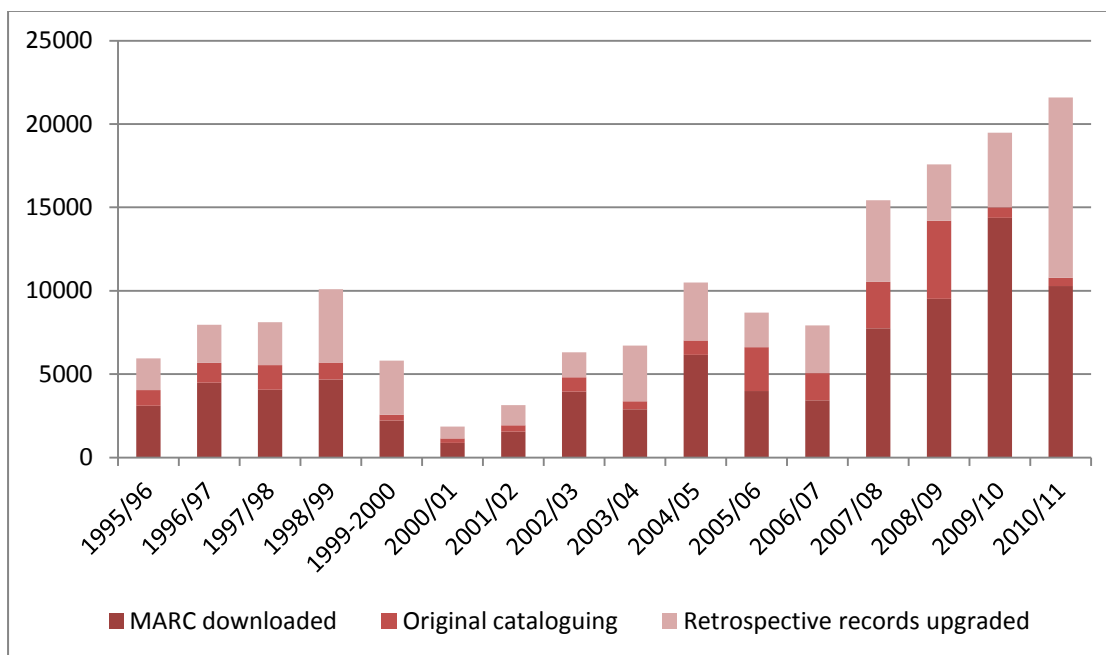
One of the aims of centralizing classification was to standardize the use of Library of Congress classification since hitherto every branch had been free to develop its own adaptations of the schedules and had done so. A proposal for a funded project to undertake the work of standardization was rejected – so we needed to absorb the most urgent areas into our regular work and complete them as and when we could.

As the team settled into its new responsibilities, time started to become available to undertake more systematic retrospective work in other areas again, and this was done focusing on team members' strengths and interests. In addition, the transfer of Special Collections to King's Meadow placed a large body of important material in need of retroconversion in close proximity. Our Central Stores of less used stock had also been

transferred to King's Meadow with even more material to retroconvert. By the end of 2010 we had completed the retroconversion of East Midlands Collection and of all material in Central Stores 1 & 2 (i.e. all subject areas).

At present, we can deal with current acquisitions and schedule each team member to spend 5-6 days per month in Hallward Library. With so much dedicated time now spent on retroconversion, each cataloguer has quantified the material she or he anticipates completing during the year – and made a plan for doing it. And the combined plans amount to 20,000 records this year.

The chart shows the retroconversion achieved by the Cataloguing Team (that is, excluding specially funded project work).



The relative amounts of cataloguing from newly downloaded MARC records, original cataloguing and upgrading of existing records fluctuate as we focus on different areas of stock, most notably with the larger amounts of original cataloguing whilst dealing with East Midlands Collection material (2008/09). The particularly lean years of 2000-2002 correspond to the first months with our new library management system and the RSLP and Adult Education Library projects. Some staff had been seconded to the projects and their positions backfilled – and hence the signs of strain!

In 2005 the increased pressure for space for user places made it desirable to remove the card catalogue. The decision was taken to digitize the catalogue as a short-term, temporary solution. The resulting catalogue provides an electronic replica of the author/title sequences of our card catalogues - images of cards with occasional index points. Additionally, the files were OCR'd so keyword access is also possible. The digitized catalogue can be viewed at: <http://nottingham.dilib.info/>

Card catalogue digitization was always regarded as a temporary solution and work on full retroconversion has continued as before. Indeed, our progress over the last few years has made it seem that retrospective conversion is perhaps not something that we will always have with us. Recent requantification of the remaining work suggests that the arts, social sciences and special collections material amounts to about 85,000 titles.

Science, engineering and agriculture account for a further 29,000. If it were possible to continue at the current rate, it would mean that the work could be finished by the end of 2017.

We have been tackling the problem of retrospective conversion however and whenever we could for many years – so which methodology works best? Nottingham noticeably has not outsourced any retro-conversion. As indicated above, we concluded that the cataloguing standard in our card catalogue would be detrimental to the creation of MARC records of an appropriate quality and therefore made it desirable to retro-convert with the items in hand.

National initiatives with special funding provide a highly productive impetus. This is not just the financial input – but also a signal that the work is of national significance, and so makes it more likely that institutions will prioritize further work. In the case of RSLP they introduced a minimum cataloguing standard which ensured that the funded work was done well – and helped to establish the standard as the norm for all work. Britain in Print provided a week's training in rare books cataloguing and use of the tools being made available for the project, which was of lasting benefit.

However, when several institutions are all trying to recruit cataloguers at the same time, then it quickly becomes apparent that there is a skills shortage here – particularly if there is some other specialism involved too, as was the case with Ensemble.

Collaborative projects may impose methodologies and accounting regimes which differ from normal institutional practice and increase the management and administration required. The timing may not fit well with the institution's other commitments – and the definition of the subject of projects may cut across the way in which material is organised. For example, after the conclusion of Revelation and Britain in Print, Nottingham still had a significant amount of theological material to convert because it was too early for one project – and published in the wrong country for the other.

Making retrospective conversion a task which is undertaken regularly by the team ensures consistency of standards, and in general, it is welcomed by the team as an area where they have greater autonomy to manage their work. From an administrative point of view, it is efficient to manage – and the institution has the flexibility to respond quickly to changing priorities. As a potential negative, one would have to accept that a team is only likely to be funded to be able to carry out a modest level of non-core work each year – so retrospective conversion carried out this way is likely to be a long drawn-out process. And that inevitably carries the risk that priorities may change before the work is completed.

The inevitable conclusion is that every method has its benefits. Completing retroconversion seems to require the engagement of every opportunity – even though some are not without considerable pain!

ⁱ Joint Funding Councils' Libraries Review Group report, December 1993 : [a report for the] Higher Education Funding Council for England, Scottish Higher Education Funding Council, Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, Department of Education for Northern Ireland. Bristol: Higher Education Funding Council for England, 1993.