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Encoded Archival Description (EAD): A Tool for the Interchange of Archival Descriptions

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‘A Flexible Friend’: The Role of Encoded Archival Description (EAD) in the Promotion of Access to Archives in the United Kingdom¹

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Introduction

Archivists in the United Kingdom (UK) were amongst the earliest implementers of Encoded Archival Description (EAD). Work began at the Public Record Office (PRO: now part of The National Archives or TNA) and a number of university archive repositories using the beta version of the EAD Document Type Definition (DTD) in 1997. This initial testing of EAD proved so successful that today, in 2004, the standard is implemented within a number of online applications, including at least two high profile and popular services providing federated access to the archival finding aids of many individual archive repositories:

- The Access to Archives Programme (A2A) provides a retroconversion service and access to descriptive metadata about archives held by local archives, museums and libraries throughout England²;
- The Archives Hub is a service creating and presenting collection (fonds) level descriptions of archives held in higher education institutions across the UK³.

These services are part of the developing national archival network and EAD is seen to have a continuing future in the process of this network's integration⁴.

This paper will, first, look at the background to the success of EAD and suggest that it had a number of advantages that meant that it was the right tool at the right time. One of these advantages, its flexibility, will then be illustrated by reference to the use made of it throughout the process of archival description by UK archivists from the creation of finding aids to their online presentation to users.

Background

The use of EAD in the UK must be seen within the context of the development of ICT and in particular the Internet in the 1990s. Archivists, like other information professionals, were not slow to see the potential of the tools of ICT to manage, describe and allow access to the archives in their care. These professional needs led directly to the development of EAD in the United States at a time in the UK when archivists were looking for tools that would enable electronic provision of access to information about their holdings to both established and new users⁵. The policy process in the public sector fortuitously backed professional desire. Government argued for the use of ICT in archives to further its policies of efficiency in government, education, social inclusion and democratic accountability⁶. This provided the necessary push for the development of programmes to provide online access to the finding aids of the PRO⁷. More recently government targets for electronic service delivery have prioritised development of online access throughout the government archive sector, local as well as national⁸. An influential report into the future of library provision in universities also called for the greater use of ICT⁹. This led directly to funding opportunities for university archives to process uncatalogued material and make the resulting finding aids available on the Internet in the late 1990s, a good example being the Department of Manuscripts and Special Collections at the University of Nottingham¹⁰. It should be no surprise, therefore, that the areas of greatest uptake of EAD in this period were at the PRO and in university archives.

The greatest wish of many archive users (and perhaps of many potential users, if they did but know it) is to be able to gain electronic access to digital representations of, at the very least, the most highly used series of archives. This objective demands much resource and will take some time to achieve. A necessary condition for its achievement is the development of descriptive metadata of archival material in electronic form. Such metadata properly presented on the Internet can go a long way to provide users with comprehensive information about archive holdings. It quickly became clear that to produce this metadata efficiently and utilise it effectively, it was necessary to have standards not only for its content and structure but also for its electronic format. EAD is of course such a data format standard and it had become available for investigation at exactly the right time.

For the early UK implementers of EAD its advantages quickly became apparent. It is itself based on open standards being a DTD of Standard Generalized Mark-up Language (SGML), an ISO standard, and is compatible with Extensible Mark-up Language (XML) and its related technologies¹¹. Thanks to the efforts of the EAD Working Group, the Library of Congress and the Society of American Archivists, it is also freely available and there is an ongoing commitment to its development and maintenance.

The conditions were right then for EAD to become a 'friend' for archivists developing online access to their material¹². The fact that it has become used as widely as it has, however, is due to a final advantage, its flexibility. This is clearly illustrated by a survey of the various roles it has played in the process of archival description and online access to descriptive metadata in the UK.

Capturing standardised metadata

EAD is used as a tool in the process of creating electronic descriptive metadata of archives. Moreover it does so in a standardised manner.

As a data structure standard rather than a content standard, EAD is explicitly designed to work with international description standards. The EAD Tag Library, therefore, provides maps of EAD tags to such standards as MARC and ISAD(G)¹³. The latter is the main descriptive standard of choice for archivists in the UK, and it is important for us that the EAD Working Group is committed to keeping the standard in-line with changes to ISAD(G). It was gratifying that compatibility with ISAD(G) was a major thread in the latest revision of EAD. There are now tags that allow the representation of finding aids that conform to the rules of multilevel description as well the representation of all ISAD(G)'s data elements.

In the early days many archivists experimented with EAD as a tool to create new finding aids. Given that EAD files are simply text files (that is the content of a finding aid, with added tags and processing instructions), they are relatively easy to create. In the UK, as elsewhere, proprietary SGML/XML authoring software is used to create EAD files, rather than word processors, as such editors allow the validation of files against the rules contained in the DTD file. An example of such use is found in the Navigational Aids for the History of Science, Technology and the Environment (NAHSTE), based at Edinburgh University Library¹⁴. Even with such editors, the routine of tagging by hand quickly becomes tiresome and templates are developed. The Archives Hub project, for example, being mainly concerned with newly created collection level descriptions has provided contributors with a tool to create descriptions online using an ISAD(G) based template that produces an EAD file¹⁵.

EAD has also been used extensively for the retroconversion of existing finding aids whether in paper or in the form of non-standardised (i.e. not ISAD(G) compliant) word-processed, spreadsheet or database files.

At the PRO, the contextual descriptions of government departments and descriptions of individual series of records that were to become the upper levels (fonds, sub-fonds and series) of the new online catalogue, were already held in electronic form as postscript files. In order to make the data conform to ISAD(G) the data for each department was exported to an EAD file, and manually edited in an SGML/XML editor. Finally the files were loaded into the TNA Online catalogue via an EAD import module.

As part of the A2A Programme legacy catalogues are converted to a standard EAD template either in-house or by keying contractors¹⁶. A good example of such a conversion service is that provided by Research Libraries Group (RLG), which has been used for example by the Modern Records Centre at Warwick University and the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford¹⁷.

While the process may differ from project to project, EAD is being used to successfully capture descriptive metadata in a standardised manner.

Editing metadata

While many UK archive repositories see the advantages of traditional relational database systems to store and edit descriptive metadata, EAD is also used as an editing and storage environment in some

cases. At the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick, for example, electronic catalogues are simply stored as EAD and edited as necessary in an SGML/XML editor¹⁸. Programmes offering federated searching also store and edit data as EAD. This is the way the Archives Hub currently operates, although increasingly contributing repositories can also edit their catalogues online. This is not the case within the A2A Programme however, as many A2A contributors have invested in cost effective proprietary archival management database systems that include cataloguing modules. Rather, as the A2A service is concerned simply with the holding of data for online search and display, a copy of contributors' data is stored centrally as EAD and the A2A central team undertakes such editing as is necessary using an SGML/XML editor.

Searching and presenting metadata

Having created descriptive metadata, the next challenge is to present it to users online and EAD is being used as a basis for this in the UK as well.

One of the advantages of EAD particularly for smaller repositories perhaps, is that it provides a relatively straightforward route to the presentation of single finding aids on the Internet. There is, however, a hurdle that has to be negotiated. Common web browsers don't display SGML files and it is necessary to convert EAD files in SGML to something that they can present, most commonly versions of HTML. In the early days many repositories presented SGML files and relied on users to buy and install SGML browsers on their home computers. This was an option for example that the PRO offered as part of its first online catalogue, the Core Executive Project¹⁹. It quickly became apparent that this was expecting too much of users and that what is needed are tools to convert EAD SGML files to HTML. Such tools are now commonly provided using XML. EAD finding aids created as SGML may be readily converted to XML and increasingly they are created as such in the first place. A stylesheet developed in XSL can then be used transform EAD files as XML into HTML which can be presented from hyperlinks as seen, for example, on the website of the Modern Records Centre of the University of Warwick²⁰.

Greater user access is given, however, by providing users with ways of searching across a number of finding aids and EAD is also used as the basis for such services. Early implementers of EAD often used the DynaText and DynaWeb software package into which EAD files as SGML could be loaded. The package provides an online search engine and 'on the fly' conversion of the EAD files to HTML for display to users. The PRO's Core Executive catalogue was offered in this way and catalogues are still done so by the Universities of Nottingham and Durham²¹.

For the UK federated searching services, it is now XML that is the technology of choice. The Archives Hub system uses the Cheshire search engine, with XML as the database format, and incorporates a client-server architecture based on the Z39.50 retrieval protocol²². The A2A database is a customized proprietary XML document manager and search engine using the HTTP protocol²³. The NAHSTE project uses the perl programming language and XML::Twig to create a database that supports online searching via CGI scripting²⁴. In all three cases the structure in the EAD files, reflecting ISAD(G) compliant data, is that used as a basis for the construction of indexes for searching. For presentation the NAHSTE project uses perl conversion to XHTML, the Archives Hub uses GRS-1 syntax for this transformation, while A2A uses a number of XSL stylesheets to present different views of the EAD files to the user.

Exchanging metadata

The examples of the individual services discussed clearly show the use of EAD as a key communication format for the transmission of standardised descriptive metadata from creation to users online. In the UK we are now working to bring such services together so that:

'a researcher anywhere in the world who has access to the Internet should be able to contact a common gateway, submit a single enquiry and receive an integrated response, listing the relevant source material housed in all UK archive repositories'²⁵.

In order to achieve this aim we are going to need to share our data and EAD has already proved a useful tool in this respect. It is for example the favoured data format for the return of finding aids retroconverted as part of A2A to contributing repositories for import into their proprietary cataloguing

systems. These databases also have the ability to export, as well as import, data as EAD. The same is true of TNA's Online Catalogue. In this area, however, the flexibility of EAD has proved to be a disadvantage. EAD offers encoders of finding aids many options, which means no two sets of EAD files will be the same. This hinders data exchange and has led to calls for EAD to be more prescriptive²⁶. In response to this, RLG's EAD Advisory Group has developed a set of Best Practice Guidelines for EAD designed with technical and user needs uppermost²⁷.

Despite this disadvantage the fact that EAD is compatible with XML does appear to ensure its future use for data exchange. This is the case as the government mandates the adoption of XML and XSL as the primary standards for data integration in the e-Government Interoperability Framework (e-GIF) designed to allow the free flow of public sector information²⁸. The National Council on Archives' Interoperability Protocol, which has the agreement of the professional archive community, therefore requires that systems that are part of the national archival network will have the ability to import and export data as EAD²⁹.

EAD as a tool in professional archival training

So EAD has a role in all these stages in the process of finding aid creation and their presentation to users online. There is one final area in which EAD has proved an invaluable tool and that is in professional archival training.

Training in EAD is provided in courses run by the Society of Archivists, EAD/Data Exchange Group or as given as part of archival education programmes in British universities. As well as learning about EAD, however, the student is often introduced to important issues relating to:

- electronic representation of texts;
- mark-up languages;
- online systems for searching and presentation of metadata;
- data exchange;
- and system interoperability.

EAD can also be a useful tool for the practical demonstration of the nature of ISAD(G) conformant hierarchical finding aids, as a final example clearly shows. Prior to the development of its online catalogue the PRO had a finding aids system made up of separate contextual descriptions of government departments and detailed lists of individual files and items. In such a cultural background, the concept of integrated finding aids conforming to ISAD(G) was initially a difficult one to get across to sceptical colleagues. In the end it was the EAD pilot developed to test EAD that enabled those of us that were ISAD(G) converts to effectively illustrate how a hierarchical finding aid actually worked.

In the area of professional training, then, as well as in the other areas discussed, EAD can indeed be seen as a 'flexible friend' in the campaign to promote greater access to archives in the UK.

(All online links were valid as of June 2004)

¹ This paper is a version of that given at the 15th Congress of International Council on Archives, Vienna, August 26 2004

² Sarah J A Flynn, Matthew Hillyard and Bill Stocking, A2A: the development of a strand in the national archives network, *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, vol 22 no 2, 2001, pp177-191. The A2A database is online at <http://www.a2a.org.uk/>

³ Amanda Hill, Bringing Archives Online through the Archives Hub, vol 23 no 2, 2002, pp239-248. The Archives Hub is online at <http://www.archiveshub.ac.uk/>

⁴ See Bill Stocking and Louise Craven, Archival Metadata and the Development of the UK Archives Network, *International Yearbook for Library and Information Management* 2003, pp109-138

⁵ For an introduction to the early development of EAD see Janice E Ruth, The Development and Structure of the EAD Document Type Definition *Journal of Internet Cataloguing* 4, no. 3-4 2001, pp27-43

⁶ See the Government Policy on Archives, 1999, and the related Action Plan (especially Objective 1), 2002, at <http://www.pro.gov.uk/archives/archivepolicy/>

⁷ For the Public Record Office see Meg Sweet, Bill Stocking, Derek Breeden, EAD at the Public Record Office, UK, Irish Archives, Summer 1998, vol 5 no 1 ns, pp 31-37; Meg, Sweet, David Thomas, Bill Stocking, Matthew Hillyard, Derek Breeden, Redesigning finding aids at the Public Record Office, Program, July 1999, vol 33 no 3, pp201-204 (for abstract see <http://www.aslib.co.uk/program/1999/jul/01.html>); and Meg Sweet, Matthew Hillyard, Derek Breeden and Bill Stocking, EAD and Government Archives, Journal of Internet Cataloguing 4, no. 3-4 2001, pp147-156

⁸ See e-government: a strategic framework for public services in the Information Age, 2000, at http://e-government.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/EStrategy/StrategicFrameworkArticle/fs/en?CONTENT_ID=4000059&chk=an9vv%2B

⁹ see the Joint Funding Council's Libraries Review Group Report (The Follett Report), 1993 at <http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/services/papers/follett/report/>

¹⁰ Dorothy Johnston, From Typescript Finding Aids to EAD: a university case study, Journal of the Society of Archivists, vol 22, no 1, 2001, pp41-42

¹¹ See 5 above

¹² See also Meg Sweet, The Internationalisation of EAD, Journal of the Society of Archivists, vol 22, no 1, 2001, p34

¹³ Available at http://www.ica.org/biblio/cds/isad_g_2e.pdf

¹⁴ Sarah Higgins and Gavin Inglis, Implementing EAD: the experience of the NAHSTE project, Journal of the Society of Archivists, vol 24, no 2, 2003, pp207-208

¹⁵ See <http://www.archiveshub.ac.uk/template/new/eadform2.html>

¹⁶ See Appendix A

¹⁷ See RLG EAD Conversion Service at http://www.rlg.org/en/page.php?Page_ID=448; for the University of Warwick see

<http://www.iath.virginia.edu/ead/sitesann.html#University%20of%20Warwick>; and for the Bodleian Library see <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/ead/sitesann.html#Bodleian>

¹⁸ See <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/ead/>

¹⁹ See references in 7 above and also Meg Sweet, Bill Stocking, Derek Breeden, EAD at the Public Record Office, UK, Irish Archives, Summer 1998, vol 5 no 1 ns, pp 32-34

²⁰ See <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/ead/examples/>

²¹ For the Public Record Office see 7 and 18 above; For the University of Nottingham see 10 above and <http://mss.library.nottingham.ac.uk/faun.html>; for the University of Durham see <http://flambard.dur.ac.uk/>

²² See Paul Watry, Archives Hub System Specification and Architecture, 2001 at <http://sca.lib.liv.ac.uk/cheshire/hubarchitecture3.html>

²³ See 2 above, pp185-189

²⁴ See 14 above, pp208-213

²⁵ See Archives On-line, National Council on Archives, 1998, at

<http://nca.archives.org.uk/ONLINE01.HTM> and for a more current view of such a national gateway see the report of the Archives Task Force, Listening to the Past, Speaking to the Future at <http://www.mla.gov.uk/action/archives/atf.asp>

²⁶ for example see Christopher J. Prom and Thomas G. Habing, Using the Open Archives Initiative Protocols with EAD, JCDL (2002) available at <http://dli.grainger.uiuc.edu/publications/jcdl2002/p14-prom.pdf>

²⁷ Available at <http://www.rlg.org/rlgead/eadguides.html>

²⁸ For the e-GIF see Office of the e-Envoy, 2003, e-Government Interoperability Framework Part One: Framework, version 6.0 at

http://www.govtalk.gov.uk/schemasstandards/egif_document.asp?docnum=874

²⁹ NCA Interoperability Protocol, 2003, available at

<http://www.ncaonline.org.uk/materials/interoperabilityprotocol.pdf>

APPENDIX A:

Access to Archives Programme (A2A): EAD template

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