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'Providing a Layman's Guide to the Scheme': Museum Computing, Professional Personas and Documentary Labour in the United Kingdom, 1967–1983

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Abstract

Between the 1960s and early-1980s the museum sector in the United Kingdom (UK) was rapidly professionalised and systematised. A crucial moment in this transition was the creation in 1967 of the Information Retrieval Group of the Museums Association (IRGMA), and the subsequent launch of its system for the machine encoding and communication of museum catalogue records. The rise of IRGMA marked an inflection point in museological practice and the normalisation of computerised work within the UK museum profession, a moment when the desire for a 'layman's guide to the scheme' began to give way to new professional personas and forms of documentary labour. This article asks how cultures of museology and professional labour shifted in response to IRGMA. It argues that between the late 1960s and mid-1980s both the implementation of and the debate around computerised cataloguing disrupted the function of UK museums and how museum professionals imagined their labour. And by tracing the emergence of these cultures and their intersections with professional identity and labour practices, this article seeks to tease out the ways museum history can resonate with wider narratives of labour, expertise and technological innovation in contemporary British history.

Keywords: museums; computerisation; professions; twentieth-century Britain; labour

> The pilot project to test the communications format, for which OSTI [Office of Scientific and Technical Information] has awarded a grant of £7,000 over two years, was started in October. It is hoping to issue shortly a further IRGMA newsletter outlining progress and providing a layman's guide to the scheme.
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> Annual Report of the Museums Association, 1971[1]

The modern museum as a space of objects, 'civilised' education and imperial authority is an idea entangled with and bound to enlightenment values,[2] and since its conception those motivated by the ideal of the modern museum have constructed and curated information about the collections under their custodianship. In the early- to mid- twentieth century, the tags, registers, labels and catalogue cards that comprised museum documentation tended to centre the needs of individual collectors, catalogers and scholar curators, and the labour that produced documentation was often fulfilled by volunteers or clerical assistants. Between the 1960s and early 1980s the museum sector in the United Kingdom (UK) was rapidly professionalised and systematised,[3] and following significant debate,[4] documentation and the projection of 'scientific information' came to be considered among the primary functions of UK museums. This function served institutions and their staff,[5] as well as fulfilling a need for museums to demonstrate accountability for the collections in their care to those local, regional and national authorities that funded their activities.[6] In turn, new sub-professions emerged to administer these new functions. Computerisation was a feature of this period of professionalisation and

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[1] The National Archives of the UK (TNA), HK 1/14 (Museums Association: Annual Reports), 1971.

[2] Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (1995).

[3] Helen Wilkinson, '"The Dawning of Professionalism": Constructing the UK Museum Profession in the 1970s and 1980s', *Enquire*, 5 (2012), 49–59.

[4] C. C. Paine, 'Recording Forms', *Museums Journal*, 70 (1970), 28; Jiří Neustupný, 'What is Museology?', *Museums Journal*, 71 (1971), 67–8.

[5] This did not typically include users. And as Kathleen Lawther has observed, when users were considered attention tended to focus on educated users, and therefore did not centre on communities with the greatest stake in collections (Lawther, People-Centred Cataloguing, 2023). Indeed, the dominant frameworks through which objects were curated in the UK in this period maintained that objects contained 'intrinsic' character and that this character was a knowable, objective quality. Daniel Reibel's work on museum documentation suggests that contemporaneous North American practices took a more playful and pragmatic approach to truth, though far from the postmodern tone that began to enter anglophone museology in the early twenty-first century; Daniel B. Reibel, *Registration Methods for Small History Museums: A Guide for Historical Collections* (Nashville, 1978).

[6] D. Andrew Roberts, 'The Changing Role of Information Professionals in Museum', in *Museums in a Digital Age*, ed. Ross Parry (2009), 15. Helen Wilkinson describes museum funding in the UK during this period as a 'mixed economy': national museums received direct funding from government; local museums received funding from county councils, metropolitan authorities, Area Museum Councils (see below), or a combination thereof; and independent museums – often subject oriented – were funded from both public and government bodies, as well as – increasingly – tickets and retail. Mid-1970s changes to local government precipitated a decline in museum funding and a decentring of museums from the heart of civic consciousness; Wilkinson, 'The Dawning of Professionalism'.

systematisation, and a crucial moment was the creation in 1967 of the Information Retrieval Group of the Museums Association (hereafter IRGMA).

IRGMA was one of many special interest groups formed within the Museums Association – the professional body for UK museums and gallery workers – in the mid-1960s. Each of these groups sought to recognise and develop specialist areas of museological practice. As conceived, IRGMA was to provide a forum for those concerned with the quality of collection documentation and interested in unifying documentary theory and practice.[7] By 1970, IRGMA was leading on the design of software, standards and records cards – often collectively described as the 'IRGMA system' – for the machine encoding and communication of museum catalogue records. In 1974 IRMGA became a research project based at the Sedgwick Museum, Cambridge, with funding from the British Library.[8] In 1976 the IRGMA system was launched, and the organisation shifted focus again, this time to supporting the implementation of computerised cataloguing in UK museums. The following year, IRGMA became the Museum Documentation Association (hereafter MDA), formed in recognition of 'the growing awareness of the need for a concerted approach to museum documentation',[9] and with four staff located at the Imperial War Museum branch at Duxford Airfield.[10] In 2008, the MDA became the Collections Trust, a reformed body tasked with supporting a UK museum sector which had by then normalised into professional practice the function of routinely creating, updating and managing collection data through collections databases. Before the launch of the IRGMA system, such databases were rarities.[11] It is simplistic, however, to say that IRGMA caused the museum database to proliferate. While the development and implementation of the IRGMA system was a catalyst for change, one system should not eclipse the profound shift in cultures of museum documentation that took place in UK museums between the mid-1960s and early 1980s.[12] It is then the emergence of these cultures and their intersections with professional identity and labour practices that this article seeks to trace.

The theory and practice of computerised documentation had existed in UK museums before the launch of the IRGMA system. In 1965, Geoffrey Lewis, IRGMA's founding chair, described the obstacles created by a lack of interoperability between existing museum databases. Lewis proposed a 'Museum Communication Format' to facilitate the machine exchange of data, to enable more efficient manipulating and recording of collection information and to form the basis of a national index of collections.[13] The latter idea can be traced

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[7] J. D. Stewart, 'MDA, MDS and Computerised Archaeology', in *Computer Applications in Archaeology*, ed. Ian Graham and Esmée Webb (1981).

[8] *MDA News*, 1 (1977), 1.

[9] *MDA Information*, 1 (1977), 1.

[10] *MDA News*, 1 (1977), 1.

[11] David Gittins, 'Computer-Based Museum Information Systems', *Museums Journal*, 76 (1976), 115–18.

[12] John M. A. Thompson (ed.), *Manual of Curatorship: A Guide to Museum Practice* (1984).

[13] G. D. Lewis, 'Obtaining Information from Museum Collections and Thoughts on a National Museum Index', *Museums Journal*, 65 (1965), 12–22.

back to the formation of Museums Association in 1889,[14] a desire never rea-
lised, stymied by systematic documentation not existing across UK museums.
Then and throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the use of formal
cataloguing technologies was characterised by the production of bespoke card
catalogues, islands of data that were only loosely connected and – with a few
pioneering exceptions – prompted few imitators.[15] The launch of the IRGMA
system put UK museums on a path towards a national collection, raising
hopes that techno-optimist fantasies could be realised. As F. J. Stott, Chair of
the MDA Executive Committee and the South-West Area Museum Council,
wrote in 1977, 'to realise our full potential to make the contribution we should
make to society, there is a need for a national catalogue' and through MDA,
Stott continued, 'there is little doubt we shall at long last have a service
which will help in a big way to make the Museum Service much more signifi-
cant throughout the whole of Great Britain'.[16] However what is significant
about the IRGMA/MDA moment is not the realisation or otherwise of long-held
dreams of information interoperability. Rather it is that this moment of opti-
mism marked an inflection point in the reshaping of museological practice and
the normalisation of computerised work within the UK museum profession, a
moment when the desire for a 'layman's guide to the scheme' began to give
way to new professional personas and forms of documentary labour.

   This article asks how the UK museums sector responded to the emergence
of computerised cataloguing in the form of IRGMA. To address this question, it
traces shifting cultures of museology and professional labour across three
parts. First, it examines the formation of IRGMA and the penetration of its
work into both the business of the Museums Association and the UK museum
profession more widely. Second, it draws out the ways in which a growing
number of UK museums sought to integrate computerised cataloguing into
their operations. It argues that while some museum professionals resisted
the new functions implied by IRGMA, the locus of debate was by the late
1970s centred on who would undertake computerised cataloguing tasks and
to what extent this labour would reshape both existing and future museum
roles. For some museum professionals, computerisation cataloguing was seen
as a moment of temporary rupture. But by contrast, for many UK museum pro-
fessionals affiliated with the Museum Ethnographers Group, the case of which
is explored in the third and final part of the article, developments in compu-
terised cataloguing infrastructure were seen as opportunities to effect change
in museological practice, as having provided a vehicle through which to assert
the particular significance of both their collections and their museums. The
international character of ethnographic collections, and the international

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[14] Sheila M. Stone, 'Documenting Collections', in *Manual of Curatorship*, ed. Thompson, 127.

[15] Most UK museums lacked the capacity to computerise their documentation. This was espe-
cially true for small museums, which also tended to have very little collection documentation,
let alone documentation in forms amenable to computerisation; see M. G. Gribble, 'The
Economics of Information Retrieval at Buxton Museum', *Museums Journal*, 72 (1972), 21–2, and
D. Andrew Roberts, 'Proposals for a Survey of Cataloguing Practice in British Museums', *Museums
Journal*, 75 (1975), 78–80.

[16] *MDA Information*, 1 (1977), 31.

networks fostered by ethnographic museums, remind us that the developments were situated within international contexts. Museums Association members represented the UK at the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and the International Committee for Documentation (CIDOC), and they reported back into the UK museums profession through Museums Association reports and conferences. But computerised documentation in the UK was resolutely national in character. Early canonical works that responded to the IRGMA/MDA moment were local in scope and focused on British examples.[17] The MDA did not hold its first international conference until 1987.[18] National dynamics therefore demand attention.

Located within the historiographies of museums, knowledge infrastructures and (information) technologies in twentieth-century Britain, this article argues that during the long 1970s the power to systematise museum documentation and to make knowledge durable was – in part – invested in new forms of what Hannah Turner has in the context of US museums in the mid-twentieth century called 'mindless work'.[19] This was work undertaken by people of all genders whose roles were frequently perceived as akin to those of clerical staff,[20] but whose competencies came to be highly valued and to reshape the professional persona of the UK museum profession. Women occupied many of these roles, and – alongside economic neoliberalism, reconfigurations to the labour force and technological innovation – gender relations were a key context to changing professional values and personas in UK museums. And what these people did had lasting impacts. In particular, their classification decisions, descriptive practices and object documentation remain with us today, whether in whole or in part, entangled with the history and architecture of modern museum information systems.[21] As such then, research into museum documentation practices is part of a multi-disciplinary endeavour to conceive of 'collections as data',[22] to understand the prehistories and social conditions of collection management that produce collections as data and to foreground the knowledge infrastructures – from accession catalogues and filing cabinets to curatorial standards and digitisation regimes – that continue to underpin the preservation, communication and machine processing of collections data.[23]

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[17] Elizabeth Orna and C. W. Pettitt, *Information Handling in Museums* (1980).

[18] D. Andrew Roberts (ed.), *Collections Management for Museums: Proceedings of an International Conference Held in Cambridge, England, 26–29 September 1987: The First Annual Conference of the Museum Documentation Association* (Cambridge, 1988).

[19] Hannah Turner, *Cataloguing Culture: Legacies of Colonialism in Museum Documentation* (Vancouver, 2020), 26.

[20] TNA, HK 1/20 (Museums Association: Annual Reports), 1977.

[21] Candace S. Greene, 'Material Connections: "The Smithsonian Effect" in Anthropological Cataloguing', *Museum Anthropology*, 39 (2016), 147–62.

[22] Thomas Padilla, Laurie Allen, Hannah Frost, Sarah Potvin, Elizabeth Russey Roke, and Stewart Varner, 'Final Report – Always Already Computational: Collections as Data', 2019, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3152935.

[23] Tonia Sutherland, 'Archival Amnesty: In Search of Black American Transitional and Restorative Justice', *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, 1 (2017), https://journals.litwinbooks.com/index.php/jclis/issue/view/3; Eun Seo Jo and Timnit Gebru, 'Lessons from

'The world's first': IRGMA in the Museums Association

The Information Retrieval Group of the Museums Association, often referred to by contemporaries as IRGMA, was formed in April 1967. In the late 1960s it became a forum for exploring the possibilities for the machine encoding of museum catalogue records in UK museums and the design features of systems that might reflect the outcome of those explorations. By October 1970, IRGMA had developed standards for encoding collections data that would enable sharing and querying between institutions and was set to embark on a two-year 'pilot project' to test the viability and implementation of those standards.

The 1971 Annual Report of the Museums Association dedicated seven lines to the work of IRGMA, an update nestled alongside reports on a wide variety of Association and sectoral business, from museum education and admission charges to recent publications and the annual Museums Association conference. Framing these reports were substantive updates on major developments in UK museums, an expected government white paper on the museums service – published later in 1971 as 'Future Policy for Museums and Galleries' – and notes on the anticipated impact on museum services of forthcoming reforms to local government.[24] These concerns both dwarfed and intersected with IRGMA's work on collections documentation: for while the technological spirit of IRGMA was absent elsewhere in the 1971 Annual Report, a spirit of professionalisation, specialisation and imminent change was pervasive.[25]

In the early-1970s the hoped for 'layman's guide to the [IRGMA] scheme' began to take shape through workshops, exhibitions and conference sessions delivered by IRGMA members. Museums Association Annual Reports in these years noted that demand for and interest in these sessions was both considerable and diverse: attendees included museum professionals ranging from collection stewards to senior museum officers.[26] Engagement with the sector by IRGMA was both general and specific, including 'meetings of subject panels concerned with the design of "minimum content" recordings forms',[27] and tests of the IRGMA system involving over 100 collection experts from across the UK.[28] Alongside these activities, IRGMA fielded requests for information, assistance and support on appropriate computing infrastructures, data processing and collection-specific implementation. By 1975, IRGMA was a regular and not insubstantial feature of the Museums Association's work and reporting, and after several false dawns the 'IRGMA system' – the contemporary shorthand for a software package, interoperable descriptive standards and record cards – was in January 1976 'formally made available to museums'.[29] Reflecting on

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Archives: Strategies for Collecting Sociocultural Data in Machine Learning', *FAT* '20: Proceedings of the 2020 Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency* (2020), 306–16; Craig Robertson, *The Filing Cabinet: A Vertical History of Information* (Minneapolis, 2021).

[24] The Local Government Act 1972 was implemented in April 1974.
[25] TNA, HK 1/14 (Museums Association: Annual Reports), 1971.
[26] TNA, HK 1/15 – HK 1/18 (Museums Association: Annual Reports), 1972–5.
[27] TNA, HK 1/17 (Museums Association: Annual Reports), 1974.
[28] Roberts, 'Proposals for a Survey of Cataloguing Practice in British Museums' (1975).
[29] TNA, HK 1/19 (Museums Association: Annual Reports), 1976.

their achievements in 1977, the IRGMA Standards Subcommittee wrote with pride that IRGMA had 'developed what are believed to be the world's first national multidisciplinary documentation standards and recording media'.[30]

Throughout this pilot and initial delivery phase, work on the IRGMA Documentation System was complemented by research into museological theory and cataloguing. In 1972, Geoffrey Lewis, Chairman of IRGMA and Director of Merseyside County Museums, provided a justification for this approach at the Museums Association Annual General Meeting, arguing that the entangling of 'theoretical exercises' with work on 'grass-roots problem[s]' was essential to IRGMA's aim to provide 'a common logical standard for museum cataloguing in this country'.[31] In turn, sections dedicated to IRGMA in future editions of the Museums Association Annual Report described the 'experimental re-ordering and retrieval operations' of records for electrostatic instruments, Andrew Roberts's MSc thesis on museum cataloguing practices and Bernard Greaves's survey of UK museum catalogues (funded by the Department of Education and Science).[32] At the February 1972 Museums Association Council Meeting, Lewis restated IRGMA's aims and reaffirmed his belief that 'mechanization for information retrieval and management would become increasingly viable'.[33] Indeed in Museums Association Annual Reports, IRGMA was regularly framed as future oriented, as a promise of and for tomorrow.[34] But the reports also indicate that the museum sector had begun to prepare for tomorrow. By March 1976, just two months after launch, over 140 institutions had ordered copies of the IRGMA cards and three print runs had been insufficient to meet demand – 270,000 cards were sold in a single year.[35] By March 1977, over 170 institutions (roughly 10 per cent per cent of Museums Association member institutions) were using the IRGMA system and jobs in museum documentation were growing in response.[36] Notably, these investments were taking place in the context of economic turbulence, local government retrenchment and severe cuts to museum services.

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[30] IRGMA Standards Subcommittee, 'Ten Years of IRGMA', *Museums Journal*, 77 (1977), 11.

[31] 'Minutes of 43rd AGM. 14 July 1972', TNA, HK 3/4 (Museums Association: Minutes of 42nd–55th meetings and 32nd meeting of Institutional Representatives), 1971–84.

[32] TNA, HK 1/16 (Museums Association: Annual Reports), 1973; TNA, HK 1/18 (Museums Association: Annual Reports), 1975; TNA, HK 1/19 (Museums Association: Annual Reports), 1976.

[33] Minutes of the meeting of Council 17 Feb 1972, TNA, HK 2/16 (Museums Association: Council agendas, minutes and papers), 1972–4.

[34] TNA, HK 1/17–1/18 (Museums Association: Annual Reports), 1975–6.

[35] Data from IRGMA Standards Subcommittee, 'Ten Years of IRGMA', 14. As both Roberts and Lewis later noted, few museums had computers at this time (Andrew Roberts, *Ideas for Museums: A Biography of Museum Computing* (2013), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZH9lTH3YuLo; Geoffrey Lewis, *Ideas for Museums: A Biography of Museum Computing* (2013), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x5odbFSRugo.). However, as the cards could be used in card catalogues without the immediate need for museum input, the IRGMA standard was still of practical application for those museums without computers; TNA, HK 1/20 (Museums Association: Annual Reports), 197.

[36] TNA, HK 1/20 (Museums Association: Annual Reports), 1977. The numbers of cards sold and institutions who bought them varies between sources – for example, *MDA News* reported in October 1977 that 'well over half a million IRGMA/MDA cards have now been purchased by over one hundred United Kingdom museums', *MDA News*, 2 (1977), 1.

Minutes of the IRGMA steering committee, both before and after the launch of their 'system', indicate the challenges associated with an accelerated demand for and rapid uptake of computerised methods for cataloguing collections information. For example, as late as autumn 1975, a few months prior to launch of their system, IRGMA had yet to develop a coordinated approach to computerised cataloguing education with the Museum Studies Department at the University of Leicester, home to the then pre-eminent – and Museums Association accredited – degree programme in museum studies.[37] After launch, matters accelerated. Minutes from early 1976 record a scramble to create an appropriate structure for IRGMA now that it had moved from design and implementation to service delivery and support: financial models were considered, cost estimates were made.[38] Driven by Lewis, an appeal was sent to the Department of Education and Science (DES) to fund a new body, tentatively called the Museums Documentation Advisory Unit, to take on the work of IRGMA outside Museums Association core funding. DES was assumed to be sympathetic to the cause: in 1973 their Wright Report had recommended a minimum standard for museum cataloguing.[39] A sum of £42,000 was requested to launch the new unit, with initial operational costs estimated at £1,000 per annum.[40] DES rejected the appeal, but they included in their rejection letter a note of encouragement and a clarification that 'national museums and the Area Museum Councils were at liberty to allocate funds from their overall budget if they so wished'.[41] By the June 1976, Lewis had approached several national museum directors with the informal proposal to create a unit funded by their museums with a start-up fee of approximately £1,000 per institution. At least two were obliging. By July 1976 sufficient support had been secured for the Museums Association Council to agree to the 'immediate formation of the Museum Documentation Advisory Unit' using a block grant from the Area Museums Councils.[42] In a few short months, the

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[37] The Department of Museum Studies was formed at University of Leicester in 1966, with its first graduate course running in 1967. The initial syllabus included as compulsory topic on 'principles of classification' (University of Leicester Special Collections (UoLSC), ULA/D4/1/5 (Syllabus for Graduate Certificate Course in Museum Studies), 2 Dec. 1966), and Geoffrey Lewis contributed lectures on 'Information Retrieval' to the visiting lecture series in 1968 and 1969 (UoLSC, ULA/D4/1/5 (Board of Museum Studies), 26 Jan. 1968 and 24 Jan. 1969). The programme's substantive engagement with computerised cataloguing did not take place until Lewis joined the Museum Studies Department in 1978. For disquiet within IRGMA over their lack of engagement with the University of Leicester, see Minutes of the IRGMA Steering Committee 16 Oct. 1975, TNA, HK 2/17 (Museums Association: Council agendas, minutes and papers), 1975–7.

[38] Minutes of the IRGMA Steering Committee 19 Jan. 1976, TNA, HK 2/17 (Museums Association: Council agendas, minutes and papers), 1975–7.

[39] Stone, 'Documenting Collections', 134.

[40] Minutes of the Meeting of Management and Finance Committee 3 March 1976, TNA, HK 2/17 (Museums Association: Council agendas, minutes and papers), 1975–7.

[41] Minutes of the IRGMA Steering Committee 4 June 1976, TNA, HK 2/17 (Museums Association: Council agendas, minutes and papers), 1975–7.

[42] The Area Museum Councils, often referred to as the Area Councils, were regional units funded by central UK government by support the museum sector; Minutes of the Meeting of Council 9 July 1976, TNA, HK 2/17 (Museums Association: Council agendas, minutes and papers), 1975–7.

Information Retrieval Group of the Museums Association was then reimagined as a body separate from the Museums Association, and in 1977 the Museum Documentation Association (MDA) – a new national organisation whose members included twelve national museums[43] – was formed. The MDA quickly became a central node in the UK's museums information ecosystem, tasked not only with assisting museums, training museum professionals, developing good practice in collections documentation and maintaining both the MDA documentation standards and software, but also with promoting museums as sources of rich, significant and nationally important information.[44]

Thereafter, the themes of documentation, cataloguing and computerisation abruptly disappeared from the published bureaucracy and reporting of the Museums Association. Even a 1978 report from the Museums Association Annual Conference themed 'New Trends and Developments on the Museum Service' made no mention of computerisation.[45] That absence was not, however, the experience of museum professionals. The creation of the MDA signalled a clear demand for the kinds of work that IRGMA had introduced, and in turn the MDA took responsibility for dissemination, communication, advocacy, support and training around computerised cataloguing.[46] In 1980 it released GOS, a software package for handling collection catalogues, announced a Software Service to assist GOS users, and launched a Computing Service to support data preparation and processing.[47] Both a newsletter and a new journal accompanied the launch of the MDA, the latter running until 2003. IRGMA was then a catalyst, from which new forms of labour, debate and professional restructure followed.

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[43] These were the British Museum, British Museum (Natural History), Imperial War Museum, Museum of London, National Army Museum, National Maritime Museum, Royal Air Force Museum, Science Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum, National Museum of Wales, Ulster Museum, and National Museum of Antiquaries of Scotland; *MDA News*, 1 (1977), 2.

[44] *MDA News*, 1 (1977), 2; *MDA Information*, 1 (1977), 1; D. Andrew Roberts, Richard B. Light and Jennifer D. Stewart, 'The Museum Documentation Association', *Museums Journal*, 80 (1980), 81–5. For an example of the MDA as central node in the UK's museums information ecosystem, see the role it would assume in running data storage services for the museum sector: see *MDA News*, 10 (1980), 1–4; Minutes of the Eleventh Annual General Meeting of the Museum Ethnographers Group, Museum Ethnographers Group (MEG), 2 April 1987.

[45] TNA, HK 1/21 (Museums Association: Annual Reports), 1978.

[46] Between the 1960s and the late 1990s workplace computer systems were designed around workplace needs and staff needed training in their use. In turn, there was a flourishing literature on designing documentation and training for workplace computer systems; David K. Farkas, 'Seeking the Future of Computer Documentation', *The Journal of Computer Documentation*, 19 (1995), 24–9; C. A Decker, 'Technical Education Transfer: Perceptions of Employee Computer Technology Self-Efficacy', *Computers in Human Behavior*, 15 (1999), 161–72. By offering training and guidance for museum employees in workplace computer use, MDA operations were in line with contemporary expectations and need. This dynamic was rapidly changed by the proliferation of WIMP-like Graphical User Interfaces whose patterns of use bridged work and home, exemplified by Windows 1995.

[47] *MDA News*, 10 (1980), 1. In late 1981 the MDA expanded staffing of the Software Service in response to demand; *MDA Information*, 5 (1981), 41.

'The revolution has come': implementing the IRGMA system

How then did the implementation of computerised cataloguing catalyse changes in the UK museum sector? Crucially, paper was not simply replaced with digital data – indeed in many cases, museums had no paper catalogues to replace. Instead, the IRGMA/MDA moment produced in the first instance new forms of material documentary practices. To use the Museum Documentation System, museums and their staff purchased 'Record Cards': stiff, matt, A5, cream-coloured card objects priced – initially – at £8.50 per 500 cards that were marked with green-tinged print: sans serif text and horizontal and vertical lines that divided the card into 'elements' and 'headings', new infrastructures of knowing and knowability.[48] A single card was intended to capture everything that needed to be recorded about a single collection item, and against each field on a card information was manually added, by hand or typewriter, intended for keying – at a later stage – into a MDA-compliant computerised catalogue. The categories that were produced by the MDA cards – 'Identification', 'Description', 'Production', 'Association' and so on – and the sub-fields within them, marked space for when, how and by whom object processing took place, broke apart stories of and narratives about objects into formal and formalised categorical genres. In turn, local, situated and historically specific descriptions of objects and their histories, that a hand axe was – for example – 'gifted to the museum in 1951 by one A. H. Bishop', were reconfigured into structured data: the word 'gift' was typed under the heading 'Acquisition Method', or the string 'Bishop, A.H.: 1951' was entered under the heading 'Acquired from : date'. This effect of categorising knowledge into fragmentary units, into snippets of language, was a deliberate outcome of the IRGMA work and the MDA system it produced, for such categorisation facilitated the objective of making museum information communicable and interoperable. In so doing, this work built on and responded to mid-twentieth-century trends in North American cataloguing.[49] But it also responded to domestic priorities, to political narratives that prized efficiency and investments with future-facing agendas, and that anticipated datafied tomorrows. Sheila M. Stone, curator at Verulamium Museum, St Albans, captured this spirit in 1978: 'Museums hold a massive amount of potentially usable data in the form of collections, a potential which is unlikely to be realized unless a museum possesses a policy of comprehensive data recording and efficient information retrieval.'[50]

The implementation of the implementation, the use of MDA cards in UK museums, reveals the ways in which labour reconfigured the MDA system in the making. Some of this reconfiguration happened before the cards were printed and arrived in museums. The final MDA system was not designed to

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[48] Prices included postage but excluded VAT; for a full price list in 1977, see *MDA News*, 1 (1977), 4. Prices rose to £12 per 500 (excluding postage and VAT) in January 1979; see *MDA Information*, 2 (1978), 74.

[49] Turner, *Cataloguing Culture*.

[50] Sheila M. Stone, 'St Albans Museums Documentation Project', *Museums Journal*, 78 (1978), 117–19.

be universal to all museum collections, but rather offered different cards for different categories of object. Fifteen variants were produced in response to initial community consultation – rising to twenty-three by 1979[51] – and these enabled museum staff to record information particular to archaeological objects, ethnography, fine art, scientific instruments and so on.[52] The inclusion on all MDA cards of a 'Note' field further indicates how the system was reconfigured by its users: contrary to the ambition to enable interoperable communication of collections data, here the system gave way to narrative description, giving museum professionals licence to tell stories about the assumed provenance of objects, about previous – erroneous – documentation, or about the complex reality of objects and their histories.

Once the cards were available to purchase, museums interested in implementing the system had to consider how that implementation might take place. MDA worked closely with UK museums on this and were, even in the early days of the system, apparently relaxed that internal conventions for the use of MDA cards were widespread,[53] this in spite of such conventions potentially impeding the interoperability of the communications format. A report published in 1981 by Manchester Museum – a pioneer in museum computing – offers a window into the labour conditions through which the MDA system was implemented and how those conditions reconfigured the MDA system at a local level. The report describes the work of the Manchester Museum Computer Cataloguing Unit (MMCCU), founded in May 1979 under the supervision of Charles Pettitt. Pettitt was at the time an Assistant Keeper of Zoology, and would in 1983 become the founding chair of the Museums Computer Group. Pettitt had arrived at Manchester Museum in 1975 and had by 1979 significant experience working with computer catalogues and computerised cataloguing.[54] Both a qualified information scientist and an expert on winkles, Pettitt was seconded to the MMCCU's Selected Temporary Employment Programme (known as STEP) to 'monitor and motivate … and provide essential continuity' for a vehicle designed to provide a workforce for computerised cataloguing.[55]

STEP was funded through the government's Job Creation Programme (JCP), a scheme administered by the Manpower Services Commission (MSC), a body of the Department of Employment formed in 1973. Ostensibly tasked with providing young people with skills and experience, the MSC was also part of a suite of market-oriented reforms to labour and working age benefits: indeed, the success of the JCP – and its successor the Youth Training Scheme – was

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[51] *MDA News*, 6 (1979), 1.

[52] D. Andrew Roberts, Richard B. Light and Jennifer D. Stewart, 'The Museum Documentation Association', *Museums Journal*, 80 (1980), 82. A sixteenth card was also made to capture details of object conservation activities.

[53] *MDA Information*, 2 (1978), 11.

[54] E. Geoffrey Hancock and Michael V. Hounsome, 'Charles Arthur William "Bill" Pettitt (20 August 1937–26 March 2009): Zoological Curator at Manchester Museum', *Natural Sciences Collections Association News*, 19 (2010), 2–6.

[55] Charles Pettitt, 'The Manchester Museum Computer Cataloguing Unit – a STEP in the Right Direction?', *Museums Journal*, 80 (1980), 188.

used in 1988 to justify the removal of unemployment benefits from school leavers under the age of 18.[56] The scheme was a particular boon for arts, culture and heritage organisations, and as Sarah Kenny has shown, JCP labour provided vital funds to community organisations whose radical instincts were at odds with the corporatist goals of the MSC.[57] By the summer of 1977, roughly eighteen months into the scheme, Museums Association members had used the JCP to bring around 400 individuals into the museum sector, over 100 of whom were allocated to cataloguing tasks (the second largest group after labouring tasks). In many cases JCP money was requested to produce MDA-compliant documentation;[58] free labour without which, Helen Wilkinson has argued, many museums would not have been able to index their collections at all.[59]

Writing in the *Museums Journal* in 1978, Frank Atkinson remarked that 'at a time when most museums are experiencing restrictions on their spending, a national grant scheme to museums, on this scale, clearly represents a remarkable windfall'.[60] This was the context in which Manchester Museum made the decision in the autumn of 1978 to apply to the JCP. Once their application was approved, sixteen new posts (rising later to twenty) were created within the MMCCU via STEP.[61] The forty-one individuals recruited into these posts across the first eighteen months of STEP did not have backgrounds in museum studies or the heritage sector. In most cases they had an education in arts and humanities, with little or no experience in information science, database management, or workplace computing. This workforce was then ideally suited to testing one of Pettitt's key aims for STEP: the viability or otherwise of using non-specialists as cataloguers.[62] As non-specialists, STEP employees were designated as Assistant Cataloguers, with pay rates pegged below those of other collection-oriented museum staff. Pettitt's aim was for them to create 'working' registers and indexes, information objects explicitly distinct from the 'pretty' catalogues associated with curatorial work.[63] Using information 'culled' from various sources – including 'the object itself, labels, old registers, field notebooks or reference sources'[64] – together with controlled vocabularies and instructions for data entry, the STEP employees completed pre-formatted data input sheets for each collection object with which they were presented. The completed sheets were then passed on to the University of Manchester Regional Computing Centre (UMRCC) – housed since 1972 just 100 metres

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[56] Kenny, 'A "Radical Project"'.

[57] *Ibid.*

[58] Frank Atkinson, 'A Report on Job Creation in Museums', *Museums Journal*, 77 (1977), 158–9. In May 1977, MDA reported that '[w]e know of about ten museums that have used these schemes as an aid to documentation'; *MDA Information*, 1 (1977), 12. See also *MDA Information*, 2 (1978), 19.

[59] Wilkinson, '"The Dawning of Professionalism": Constructing the UK Museum Profession in the 1970s and 1980s'.

[60] Atkinson, 'Job Creation in Museums', 158.

[61] Pettitt, 'Manchester Museum Computer Cataloguing Unit', 191.

[62] *Ibid.*, 187.

[63] *Ibid.*, 188.

[64] *Ibid.*

along the Oxford Road from Manchester Museum – for conversion into the punch cards needed for data entry. By late 1980, over 175,000 object records had been created by the STEP employees and their supervisory team.[65]

Notwithstanding the variety and complexity of the collections they worked with, computerised cataloguing undertaken by the STEP employees was repetitive, high-volume labour. To make this labour more tolerable, Manchester Museum allocated resources to creating a working environment suitable for this kind of labour. 'People will not produce their best results', wrote Pettitt, 'if housed in poor conditions'.[66] In turn Pettitt sought to craft working conditions that would enable the STEP employees to produce said 'results'. They shared a workspace that was well lit and appropriately heated. They had space to lay out and to store documents and objects. They had access to training and professional development opportunities. They were encouraged to take regular breaks and had access to a dedicated rest area, to grievance-reporting processes and to supervisory support.[67] The treatment of the STEP employees – as described by Pettitt – was intended to be caring. But it was also constructed in recognition that – done well – data production was labour that demanded attentiveness, that lapses in attention created errors and that errors were contrary to the very enterprise of computerising catalogue data, predicated as it was on enabling an escape from the subjectivities of paper-based methods and on delivering the promise of interoperable information communication.

For all Pettitt's conviction that computerised catalogue data would benefit museums, the collections they looked after and curatorial work, it is significant that the design of STEP and their description of it in operation indicate that for Pettitt this labour was distinct from curatorial labour – a discrete unit that completed particular tasks of a routine nature fit for a general workforce that needed only minimal oversight from established museum professionals. Underpinning this view was the goal-oriented framing of STEP, a belief that its work comprised a project that could be completed, done, moved on from, rather than representing an ongoing function. This perspective chimes with evidence reported to Frank Atkinson in his mid-1970s survey of UK museums and their experiences of the JCP. Atkinson noted that the uses of the scheme that had proven most successful were 'those where something could be done, as a 'one-off' job which otherwise would *not* get done'. Cataloguing – including 'transferring existing records on to the IRGMA format' – was substantial among the 'one-off' jobs UK museums used the JCP to fund,[68] and many other museums, after initial testing of the MDA system, appear to have been waiting on a successful application to the JCP scheme before initiating the computerisation of their records.[69] That is, while the structure of the JCP did contribute to the separation of computerised documentary labour from everyday museum work, those labour conditions were also brought into being by how the UK

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[65] *Ibid.*, 191.

[66] *Ibid.*, 190.

[67] *Ibid.*

[68] Atkinson, 'Job Creation in Museums', 159.

[69] Sheila Stone, 'MDA User Experience: St. Albans Museums', *MDA Information*, 3 (1979), 51.

old cataloguing system is adequate'".[74] Moreover, by using the JCP to train specialists in the use of the MDA system, Mackie *was* imagining a new professional persona for museum professionals. Of the four cataloguers the Hunterian hired through the JCP in 1977, three – all of whom were women – subsequently found employment in the sector.[75] For Mackie this was evidence that the Museums Association had 'a duty to recommend the MDA cataloguing system as part of standard museum work and to train future members of the profession in it'.[76]

The use of JCP by Manchester Museum, the Hunterian Museum and the wider Museums Association membership underscores the penetration of the MDA system into the UK museum sector – indeed, supported by the MDA, the number of institutions using computerised cataloguing doubled between 1977 and 1981 to over 300.[77] Museum education was slow to catch up with this shifting professional landscape and the transformations to the production of museum documentation that were facilitated by computerisation. When it did, it embodied the turn towards cataloguing fulfilling the civic role of UK museums: 'Collection documentation', stated the University of Leicester's 1986 study guide for Museum Studies students, 'is necessary in order that publicly supported institutions are able to show they are managing their affairs to accepted standards'.[78] Indeed shortly after Geoffrey Lewis joined University of Leicester as Director of Museum Studies in 1978, their MA, MSc and Diploma programmes all integrated knowledge of MDA and – once released – GOS software into the learning outcomes of the programme, and retained those themes throughout the 1980s.[79] Members of the MDA team visited the department to deliver lectures to students and to provide learning materials.[80] And exam questions tested prospective museum curators on approaches to training new staff in how to use the MDA system,[81] recent developments in computerised documentation,[82] and how systems such as MDA might improve collection research.[83] The impact of these initiatives was not immediate. But what they speak to are the competing visions of museum work that emerged in the late 1970s and mid-1980s, the proliferating of views on the significance of computerised cataloguing to the profession. At one extreme, this labour was considered a 'one-off' task that would pass through the sector without

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[74] *Ibid.*

[75] *Ibid.*, 86.

[76] *Ibid.*, 89.

[77] *MDA Information*, 5 (1981), 34.

[78] UoLSC, Uncat. Dept Mus. Stud Box (Collection Management (Museum Studies Note 2)), 1986.

[79] UoLSC, Uncat. Dept Mus. Stud Box. (Learning Goals in Museum Studies Training), 1980, 1982, 1984 and 1988.

[80] UoLSC, Uncat. Dept Mus. Stud Acc 2019/26 (Susan Kirby's Notes from Study on Museum Studies Degree), 1978–9.

[81] UoLSC, Uncat. Dept Mus. Stud Exam Papers (Midsummer Examinations: 1979 – Museum Studies – Paper 1: General), 1979.

[82] UoLSC, Uncat. Dept Mus. Stud Exam Papers (Midsummer Examinations: 1981 – Museum Studies – Paper 2: General), 1981.

[83] UoLSC, Uncat. Dept Mus. Stud Exam Papers (Midsummer Examinations: 1985 – Museum Studies – Paper 2: General), 1985.

reshaping its workforce; at the other it was considered an essential component of the present and future curatorial profession. To better understand the emergence of these positions, it is useful to turn to the theoretical debates that accompanied the development of the IRGMA system, and – in particular – to examine the engagement of one group of UK museum professionals with the concept of computerised cataloguing: curators at ethnographic museums.

'A stimulus for discussion': IRGMA and the Museum Ethnographers Group

The opportunities to implement computerised cataloguing that were afforded by the Job Creation Programme coincided with a period of considerable debate among UK museum practitioners. Introspective debate was not new for the sector. But while post-war debates were characterised by a focus on the recovery and expansion of the sector, in the 1970s and early 1980s – notwithstanding anxieties over funding cuts and local government restructuring – debate tended to focus on the purpose and function of UK museums: what they did not do but should do, whose interests they served and whose they should serve, and why that was the case.

How did museum documentation fit into this debate? *Museums Journal*, the sectoral journal published quarterly by the Museums Association, offers one way into this question. Between 1967 and 1983 alongside papers reporting on – *inter alia* – the conclusion of major gallery refurbishments, educational outreach, surveys on regional staffing, innovations in conservation techniques and commentaries on the future of public museums, a steady drip of papers was published on documentation projects, computerised cataloguing and the progress and delivery of IRGMA/MDA. These papers were characterised by optimism, the sharing of best practice and a desire to communicate the scope and extent of change. Elsewhere in the UK museum sector, in specialist communities, publications and venues, in museum practices less well represented by a formal publication such as *Museums Journal*, this picture was complemented by rich and vigorous debate emerging over how best to represent museum collections as data. One area of particular focus was around the extent to which the IRGMA system might systematise and constrain documentary practice in ways that were misaligned with the evolving intellectual agendas of particular communities. In turn, subcommittees were formed that enabled custodians of decorative arts, costume, photography, technology and many others to shape the MDA system to their needs.[84] And as we have seen, fifteen variants of the MDA cards were designed in response to this community consultation. Ethnography cards were one such category. As a subfield whose professional coalescence in the UK coincided with the maturation of IRGMA, museum ethnography offers a useful case study of sectoral debates around the implementation of computerised cataloguing and the professional persona of curators in UK museums. Moreover, museum ethnographers had a long tradition of thoughtful engagement around documentary practice. During

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[84] *MDA Information*, 1 (1977), 60; *MDA News*, 3 (1978), 1–2.

the 1940s, the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford – then the UK's foremost ethnographic museum – developed a model for classifying ethnographic collections that systematised the museum's accession records into over 400 file drawers of card indexes.[85] This work, led by Beatrice Blackwood, would form the basis of the museum's computerisation work into the late 1980s. In *The Classification of Artefacts in the Pitt Rivers Museum Oxford*, published in 1970, Blackwood paints a vivid portrait of this labour:

> The laborious work of copying in duplicate on 5″ X 3″ index cards the entries in the Accessions Books (until then the only record of what the Museum possessed), was done by [T.K.] Penniman and his colleagues during the dark days of the Second World War. We could not black-out the Museum, but we could, and did, pick up an Accessions Book, a few packets of index cards and a portable typewriter, and take them to a blacked-out room.[86]

What is captured neither by Blackwood's description of their role in the production of these card indexes, nor by the sense that the work was unremarkable (if having taken place in remarkable times), was the particularity of the classificatory system Blackwood developed: fifty pages of classificatory headings from death and divination to techniques and time indicators, all developed to meet the specific needs not of an individual collector but rather of a particular group of professionals working with ethnographic collections at a particular place and time.[87]

It is fitting then that Blackwood was one of many women curators – roughly half of the total participants – who in 1974 and 1975 attended gatherings of ethnographers from UK museums that culminated in 1976 with the creation of the Museum Ethnographers Group (hereafter MEG). MEG continued the tradition – exemplified by Blackwood – of museum ethnographers taking a keen interest in the task of arranging the collections under their care, and of women playing a key role in how and in what ways that arrangement was implemented. Formed as IRGMA was moving into an implementation phase for its system, MEG initially occupied itself with a core set of priorities that emerged from its members: training in identifying ethnographic collections, qualification and professional recognition, human remains and restitution, publication and outreach, liaison with professional bodies such as the Museums Association (who almost immediately redirected ethnographic queries and matters to MEG),[88] growing their membership, understanding and documenting ethnographic holdings in the UK and communicating those

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[85] Minutes of the Eighth Annual General Meeting of the Museum Ethnographers Group, MEG, 6 April 1984.

[86] Beatrice Blackwood, *The Classification of Artefacts in the Pitt Rivers Museum Oxford*, Occasional Papers on Technology 11 (Oxford, 1970), 12.

[87] As Dan Hicks argues, the history of the Pitt Rivers Museum is steeped in white sight, colonial exploitation and racially inscribed museological practice; Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (2020).

[88] Secretary's Report 1977/78, MEG, 1978.

collections to interested publics. As part of the latter, MEG members recognised that ethnographic collections would benefit from more rigorous cataloguing, and that in the context of the IRGMA project their collections demanded a bespoke solution, a view that was reported in the first *MEG Newsletter*.[89] The following year, Len Pole – then curator at Saffron Walden Museum – described in the *MEG Newsletter* his attempts to design an IRGMA ethnography card. Pole was encouraged to do so by Andrew Roberts, one of the Research Assistants working on IRGMA at the Sedgwick Museum. Pole's aim was to work towards a card format that would be acceptable to most museum ethnographers in the UK and in turn make interoperable the collections information they held and produced. Debate and consensus were, for Pole, central to the process:

> The card produced ... is not intended to be the final version, but merely to act as a stimulus for discussion. It is, particularly, not intended for use until a final version has been worked out and accepted. It is not my intention to coerce others into accepting it. I am, however, of the opinion that some version of a card employing the format worked out by the IRGMA is to be preferred, for use by those museums not already blessed (or encumbered?) with a developed cataloguing procedure, to a card produced independently of it.[90]

In the late 1970s many ethnographic museums in the UK were in this 'blessed' position. Ethnographic collections tended – despite the field's historical engagement with innovative documentary practice – to lack comprehensive documentation. A 1981 survey of 311 museums with ethnographic collections found that 93.9 per cent had nothing published about those collections, 53.7 per cent had neither documentation or archives relating to them and only 53 per cent were able to estimate the extent of the collections.[91] This absence meant that museum ethnographers were well positioned to respond to developments in computerised cataloguing 'without' – as Pole sharply mused – 'the encumbrance of past curators' foresight'.[92]

At a meeting held at the Museum of Mankind in November 1976 to discuss collection documentation, MEG members were joined by Richard Light, representing what would soon be the MDA.[93] Having not worked with ethnographers during the development of IRGMA,[94] Light was keen to learn if their field 'present[ed] any special difficulties'. The prompt revealed a variability of practice among museum ethnographers, and their inexperience with the

[89] 'Information Retrieval', *Newsletter (Museum Ethnographers Group)*, 1 (1976), 4.
[90] Len Pole, 'Suggestions for a Future IRGMA Ethnography Object Catalogue Card', *Newsletter (Museum Ethnographers Group)*, 3 (1977), 10.
[91] David Jones, 'The Register of Ethnographic Collections: A Report on Work in Progress', *Newsletter (Museum Ethnographers Group)*, 11 (1981), 58.
[92] Pole, 'Suggestions', 9.
[93] 'M.E.G. Information Retrieval Meeting', *Newsletter (Museum Ethnographers Group)*, 3 (1977), 10–11.
[94] Pole, 'Suggestions', 10.

kind of approach that IRGMA invoked. While some members were already experimenting with computerised cataloguing, others were more hesitant and felt that more foundational cataloguing and classification protocols would need to be worked through before implementation of the IRGMA system could be considered. And while one attendee 'pointed out that despite what ethnographers may like to think, the complexity of ethnographic material is not greater than that of other kinds of museum object',[95] by the autumn of 1977 a MDA Ethnography Committee had been formed to compare existing approaches and to explore the possibility of developing a card specifically for documenting ethnographic material.[96] In January 1978 a draft form of that card was ready for community scrutiny.[97] Second and third drafts appeared in February and June respectively and were again made available for comment.[98] The already generous section that allowed for the input of free text description was expanded.[99] And in October 1978 the results of this work went into print as 'Ethnography/Folk Life' cards,[100] at which point the MDA Ethnography Committee was dissolved and members turned their attentions to enabling the consistent usage of the cards.[101]

Like all MDA cards, the Ethnography/Folk Life Record Card was A5 in size with headings and boxes printed on obverse and reverse. The structure of the card built on the earlier Archaeology card by – unlike most MDA cards – including dedicated space for recording details of field sites and object collection.[102] But the Ethnography/Folk Life card also deviated by, as described in its accompanying guide, placing 'emphasis ... on the object in the context of pre- or non-industrial society'.[103] For example, after the museum number, the first element a cataloguer would be presented with when completing or using an MDA card was the 'Identification' element. This was subdivided into headings for recording simple, alternative and full names for the object and any external identifiers associated with it (e.g. in a published classification scheme). The Archaeology card built on this convention by including a 'Materials/keyword detail' heading in the 'Identification' element, a nod towards the priorities of archaeological curation. But the Ethnography/Folk Life card went further, effectively upending the conventional structure of the 'Identification' element. The 'simple name' heading was retained for

[95] 'M.E.G. Information Retrieval Meeting', 11.
[96] Minutes of the Second Committee Meeting of the Museum Ethnographers Group, MEG, 28 Oct. 1977; 'Museum Documentation Association', *Newsletter (Museum Ethnographers Group)*, 4 (1977), 30.
[97] 'Museum Documentation Association', *Newsletter (Museum Ethnographers Group)*, 5 (1978), 18.
[98] Minutes of the Third Committee Meeting of the Museum Ethnographers Group, MEG, 17 Feb. 1978.
[99] *MDA Information*, 1 (1977), 107.
[100] 'Museum Documentation Association', *Newsletter (Museum Ethnographers Group)*, 6 (1978), 18; Minutes of the Fifth Committee Meeting of the Museum Ethnographers Group, MEG, 6 Oct. 1978.
[101] Minutes of the Fourth Committee Meeting of the Museum Ethnographers Group, MEG, 16 June 1978.
[102] Alignment with the Archaeology card was agreed late into the development of the Ethnography/Folk Life card; *MDA Information*, 2 (1978), 27.
[103] *Ethnography/Folk Life Card Instructions*, Museum Documentation System (Duxford, 1979), 6.

recording 'one readily understood keyword suitable as an index heading', such as 'fan' or 'sword'.[104] The 'full name' heading was retained to provide space for 'one or more series of descriptions which amplify the "simple name"'.[105] And the 'classified identification' heading was retained, with the instructions for its use that drew on ethnographers like Blackwood and the prominence of controlled vocabularies in their approach to documentation.[106] But placed leftmost in the 'Identification' element and therefore foremost in its use were two new headings – 'Continent' and 'area' – intended as spaces to record the geographical origins of the object. These supplemented headings for places of production and object collection elsewhere in the record card, foregrounding locality as the datatype that MEG members saw as the main reason for ethnographic collections needing a bespoke solution within the MDA system, a data type that – in line with contemporaneous ideologies in museum ethnography – emphasised homogenised people over individual creators, ethnographic objects as representative of unchanging place-based cultures rather than dynamic and polysemous human agency.[107]

Initial sales of the Ethnography/Folk Life card were brisk: 23,100 copies were sold in its first year of issue.[108] MEG, then, used a moment of debate around the practice of museum ethnography to leverage the MDA system to serve the needs of ethnographic institutions and their staff. New approaches to classifying and cataloguing ethnographic collections were published and recommended to MEG members.[109] Controlled vocabularies were developed and the case for their implementation established.[110] The relationship between staff turnover and terminological inconsistency was investigated.[111] Museum

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[104] *Ibid.*, 24.

[105] *Ibid.*, 24–5.

[106] *MDA Information*, 1 (1977), 72–3; *Ethnography/Folk Life Card Instructions*, 24.

[107] Making African Connections Project, 'Making African Connections: Decolonial Futures for Colonial Collections. Initial Findings and Recommendations' (2021), https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4456781.

[108] *MDA Information*, 2 (1978), 65; *MDA Information*, 2 (1978), 75; *MDA Information*, 3 (1979), 48. By comparison the general Museum Object card – consistently the highest selling MDA card – sold 45,000 copies in the same period.

[109] 'Museum Documentation Association', *Newsletter (Museum Ethnographers Group)*, 6 (1978), 18.

[110] 'Gazeteer of Obsolete/Alternative Names of the Pacific Islands', *Newsletter (Museum Ethnographers Group)*, 2 (1976), 9; Len Pole, 'On Good Terms: Vocabulary Control in the Description of Ethnography Collections', *Newsletter (Museum Ethnographers Group)*, 13 (1982); Minutes of the Fourth Annual General Meeting of the Museum Ethnographers Group, MEG, 25 April 1980.

[111] Pole, 'On Good Terms'. Note that this debate fell short of cataloguing practice being considered something other than neutral, and the field had yet to respond reflexively to the coloniality of the collections and their practice – a paper from the Latin Americanist Colin Henfrey 'seemed to stun' MEG members by taking the 'radical viewpoint' that the interpretation of a museum object should foreground its entanglement with colonial exploitation; see Minutes of the Ethnology Seminar of the Museum Ethnographers Group, MEG, March 1975. It appears, however, that there were dissenting progressive voices within MEG, and by the close of the decade the MEG Committee felt confident not to accept policy guidance on restitution prepared by Pole that sought to distance a given museum from bearing responsibility for the possession of illegally displaced collections; see Len Pole 'Notes and Guidelines on the Restitution and Return of Cultural

ethnographers debated implementations of computerised cataloguing and how to enable better interoperability between collection documentation.[112] And while Euan Mackie and his colleagues at the Hunterian were convinced that computerised cataloguing was of benefit to museum ethnographers, the collections under their care and their museums, others needed reassurance that computerisation was not an imposition of order onto complexity, that implementing a system like MDA was intended only to enhance the discoverability of collections,[113] and that the IRGMA process had produced a system that was flexible, that was designed to meet the needs of individual institutions.[114] 'It has never been suggested', wrote Pole in February 1978, 'that a well ordered working Index should be immediately replaced by M.D.A cards'. Rather, Pole continued, the 'immediate value lies in the use of cards for those collections which have not yet been properly Indexed'.[115] Among museum ethnographers in the UK, we see then that histories of bespoke cataloguing practice and prior investments – or otherwise – in documentation intersected with the rise in computerised cataloguing to produce a burst of lively, engaged and productive debate around the nature of their curatorial practice. The implementation and implications of computerised cataloguing was a throughline of MEG business into the mid-1980s,[116] indicating that the shifts in practice that IRGMA embodied mattered to their collective sense of what it meant to be a museum professional.

Conclusion

Between the late 1960s and the mid-1980s both the implementation of and the debate around computerised cataloguing disrupted the function of UK museums and how museum professionals imagined their labour. As we have seen, the period was characterised by the emergence of new forms of professionalisation, systemisation and specialisation. Documentation that served institutional and civic need was part of that emergence and became in this period a core function of UK museums. Through IRGMA, museum documentation benefited from investment, from sustained attention that made it theoretically possible to communicate and cross-search information about museum

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Property', *Newsletter (Museum Ethnographers Group)*, 7 (1979), 18–19, and response Minutes of the Sixth Committee Meeting of the Museum Ethnographers Group, MEG, 19 January 1979.

[112] 'M.E.G. Information Retrieval Meeting', *Newsletter (Museum Ethnographers Group)*, 3 (1977), 10–11; Minutes of the Seventh Committee Meeting of the Museum Ethnographers Group, MEG, 16 March 1979; Minutes of the Tenth Committee Meeting of the Museum Ethnographers Group, MEG, 10 Dec. 1979.

[113] 'M.E.G. Information Retrieval Meeting', *Newsletter (Museum Ethnographers Group)*, 3 (1977), 11.

[114] Len Pole, 'Suggestions for a future IRGMA Ethnography Object Catalogue Card', *Newsletter (Museum Ethnographers Group)*, 3 (1977), 9–10.

[115] Len Pole, 'Museum Documentation Association', *Newsletter (Museum Ethnographers Group)*, 5 (1978), 18.

[116] Minutes of the Seventh Annual General Meeting of the Museum Ethnographers Group, MEG, 22 April 1983; Minutes of the Ninth Annual General Meeting of the Museum Ethnographers Group, MEG, 19 April 1985.

collections in ways that were attentive to museological subfields and their curatorial expertise. And through the MDA infrastructure of software, standards and input cards, as well as the opportunities presented by the JCP, many UK museums began to computerise their collections information and expertise for the first time. In turn there was a shift in the work that people did in UK museums, the types of people who did that work and the ascriptions of value afforded to different types of museum labour.

This shift was not uniform. Some museums drew on temporary labour, some did not. In some cases, clear distinctions were drawn between curatorial staff and those who could and – crucially – *should* use computers,[117] spawning new 'clerical', 'typist' and 'trained recorder' roles.[118] In other museums – especially smaller museums[119] – computerised cataloguing became yet another responsibility of museum curators, a new function bolted onto their already time-pressed, jack-of-all-trades professional persona. Museum education was slow to catch up with this shifting professional landscape. Euan Mackie's call in 1980 for the Museums Association to prioritise professional training on the MDA system indicates that both 'mindless' and critical approaches to computerised documentation were not filtering through from educational settings into museum workplaces as fast as some hoped they would. And the silos created by specialisation – signalled by the disappearance of computerised cataloguing from core Museums Association communications after the formation of the MDA – appear not to have helped the likes of Mackie to gain traction for their views within the profession, at least in the short term.

Nevertheless, it is clear that computerisation contributed to a cultural shift in UK museums, and that the emergence of IRGMA and its development as the MDA marked a growing, if uneven, recognition of the importance of good documentation to good museum practice. It is also significant that some museum subfields, such as museum ethnographers, embraced this change as a lens through which to reflect more widely on their curatorial practice – they, like Euan Mackie, Manchester Museum, University of Leicester's Museum Studies Department and the 300 or so UK museums that had by March 1981 invested in IRGMA cards, perhaps saw that there was no going back, and resolved to shape the change that was coming rather than let narratives of technological efficiency happen to them. At the same time the rise of computerised documentation did not mean that the – usually male coded – scholar curator was immediately displaced, either in practice or in the professional imaginary. When Lewis spoke about the potential advantages of IRGMA at the February 1972 Museums Association Council Meeting, they emphasised the benefits of the proposed system in terms of museum budgets at a time of fiscal retrenchment: by mechanising cataloguing labour, cheaper people could be found to do that labour, freeing – by implication – curators

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[117] David Gittins, 'Computer-Based Museum Information Systems', *Museums Journal*, 76 (1976), 115–18.

[118] Laurel Ball, 'Recording Agricultural Collections', *Museums Journal*, 72 (1972), 55–7.

[119] Stone, 'Documenting Collections', 129.

to do other things.[120] The 'layman's guide to the scheme' was not then imagined by Lewis as a cheat sheet that would transform every curator into a computerised cataloguer and their museums into sites of datafield information exchange. Rather it was a prospectus on an imagined future workforce, of new professional personas and forms of documentary labour that had by the early 1980s not yet fully arrived, but that were beginning to take shape as computerised work was normalised within and fashioned by the UK museum profession.

These shifts did not take place in a vacuum. The history of museums shaped and was shaped by broader currents of contemporary British History. The emergence of computerised cataloguing in museums aligns chronologically with the rise of (white) male-identified dominion over British computing jobs and – once defeminised – the attendant reconfiguration of those jobs as sites of power, expertise and innovation.[121] The uneven approach taken by UK museums to new forms of documentary labour, especially those roles funded by the Job Creation Programme, contributes to our understanding of the ways Britain's governing classes attempted to structure youth training and education during deindustrialisation,[122] as well as broader reappraisals of who made, sustained and benefited from neoliberal politics.[123] The role of the Department of Education and Science in supporting – if not decisively funding – IRGMA/MDA contextualises work on the political drivers of technological change and furthers our understanding of both state and quasi-governmental systems and the levels of technical expertise that drove their development.[124] The assumed training need created by the IRGMA/MDA system underscores the everyday frictions experienced as information technologies entered mid- to late twentieth-century workplaces and civic environments.[125] The decisive role of the UK museum sector in the development of its own cataloguing software, standards and systems offers a localised perspective on the information revolution. In particular, it provides insight into visions of national leadership in technological development that pre-dated assumptions of North American economic hegemony, and a globalised information, what Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron would later call

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[120] Minutes of the meeting of Council 17 Feb. 1972, TNA, HK 2/16 (Museums Association: Council agendas, minutes and papers), 1972–4.

[121] Mar Hicks, *Programmed Inequality: How Britain Discarded Women Technologists and Lost its Edge in Computing* (Cambridge, MA, 2017).

[122] Peter Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy: Britain's Transition to Mass Education since the Second World War* (Oxford, 2020); Sarah Kenny, 'A "Radical Project": Youth Culture, Leisure, and Politics in 1980s Sheffield', *Twentieth Century British History*, 30 (2019), 557–84.

[123] Aled Davies, Ben Jackson and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite (eds.), *The Neoliberal Age? Britain since the 1970s* (2021).

[124] David Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation: A Twentieth-Century History* (2018); Jon Agar, *The Government Machine a Revolutionary History of the Computer* (Cambridge, MA, 2003).

[125] Carmen Flury and Michael Geiss (eds.), *How Computers Entered the Classroom, 1960–2000: Historical Perspectives* (Berlin, 2023); James Baker and David Geiringer, 'Space, Text and Selfhood: Encounters with the Personal Computer in the Mass Observation Project Archive, 1991–2004', *Contemporary British History*, 33 (2018), 293–312; Paul Dourish, *Where the Action Is: The Foundations of Embodied Interaction* (Cambridge, MA, 2001).

'The Californian Ideology': a belief in the emancipatory potential of techno-logical progress unencumbered by regulation, taxation and state intervention that Barbrook and Cameron read as an exploitative fiction concocted by 'hip and rich' – and mostly white – east coast Americans, largely for their own advancement and enrichment.[126] Finally, museum documentation – and the classification, standardisation and intuition dressed up as reason that they embody – are forms of authority that have remarkable durability.[127] Researching the conditions that produced museum documentation in the years after the formation of IRGMA is then vital to understanding the records that remain with us today, because it was those records that would form the basis of museum databases as the sector encountered later and accelerated phases of computerisation. And it is the shadows, legacies and positionalities of those records which not only remain entangled in the information systems of the present but continue to be projected into our shared futures.[128]

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[126] Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, 'The Californian Ideology', *Science as Culture*, 6 (1996), 44–72.

[127] Turner, *Cataloguing Culture*; Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham, NC, 2016).

[128] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1996).