Numbering: *SPECTRUM 4.0*

Introduction

Most museums will need to use several distinct numbering sequences for different procedures within their documentation system. Numbers provide a code for uniquely identifying objects. They allow convenient and precise cross-reference between records. The sequences needed and the form they take will vary from museum to museum depending on individual needs and past practice.

The following numbering sequences will often be used.

Entry numbering

*(see **SPECTRUM 4.0: Object entry** and **Loans in**)*

The *SPECTRUM Minimum Standard* for numbering objects entering your museum requires that you:

- Uniquely identify the newly received object or associated group of objects.

The entry number provides an initial number for every object or group of objects entering the museum. The entry number is the number allocated on the entry form. It identifies objects until they are either returned to their owner or formally acquired by the museum. If it is not possible to number every object in a group, assign numbers to groups of objects rather than individual items.

What form should the entry number take?

A simple running number sequence is best, prefixed with an E to distinguish it from other numbering systems:

eg E2561; E2562; E2563; E2564; E2565 ....

Individual items within a group can be identified by adding a suffix:

eg E2561.1; E2461.2; E2561.3; E2561.4 ....

Accession and identity number

*(see **SPECTRUM Procedure: Acquisition**)*

The *SPECTRUM Minimum Standard* for numbering objects accessioned into your collections requires that you:

- Ensure that a unique number is assigned to, and physically associated with, all objects;
- Ensure that accession registers are maintained, describing all acquisitions and listing them by number.

The accession number is the number allocated in the accession register. This only applied to items formally acquired by the museum. A unique number should be assigned to each object or group of objects. Your museum should have a policy for deciding the format of its numbers. This should be recorded in a

procedural manual.

What form should the accession number take?

The accession number is a code for identification and cross-referral. Do not incorporate catalogue information such as a classification code or storage location. Using the entry number as an accession number also causes problems, as it will lead to gaps in the accession series when loans, identifications etc are returned. There are two common approaches:

A simple running number system:

eg 14603; 14604; 14605; 14606; 14607 ....

A more common system is to use the year of accession followed by a running number:

eg 1991.3; 1991.4; 1991.5; 1991.6; 1991.7 ...

Do not abbreviate the year to just two digits, as hopefully most museums will survive for more than a century. It can also cause confusion. For example, does '64.68' mean 1964 or 1968? Do not place the year element last as this will cause a problem for computerised sorting of records.

eg 1991.5 is correct rather than 91.5 or 5.1991 or 5.91

Numbering individual items

Items that are given to the museum individually should be given different accession numbers, then the accession number serves as the identity number. Four objects that were acquired separately from different sources, would be numbered:

eg 1999.1; 1999.2; 1999.3; 1999.4

Numbering groups of items

Individual numbers for each item
Some museums give a different number to each individual item in a group. For example is your museum received a collection of four glass negatives, each could be allocated a separate number

eg 1999.21; 1999.22; 1999.23; 1999.24

This approach can break down if your museum receives a large collection from a single source, for example a collection of several thousand glass plate negatives or the complete contents of a cobbler's workshop. You will be unable to allocate accession numbers to the next entry group until the large collection has been fully numbered. This can create an accession backlog.

Part numbers
A group of items could be allocated the same accession number and a suffix added to create a unique identity number. For example a group of four objects brought into the museum together might be accessioned as 1991.24. Each individual item would then be numbered:

eg 1991.24.1; 1991.24.2; 1991.24.3; 1991.24.4 ….

One number for a group of items
Where large numbers of similar objects are physically grouped together they can be numbered as one object. For example, for a group of sherds in a secure container the container may be numbered, the contents counted and the total recorded. A card of 20 buttons can be allocated one accession number, not 20.

Numbering archaeology

(see SPECTRUM Procedure: Pre-entry)

In England, Wales, Northern Ireland, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man: assign an accession number before fieldwork starts. In Scotland: the receiving museum can only assign accession numbers once the material has been formally disposed to them.

There are two options for assigning identity codes:

- *Using a museum accession number*
  This is frequently the best option for long-term curation, as it will fit in with existing museum systems and it means you will not have to re-mark objects. This may be the preferred method for museums which regularly receive archaeological archives from a number of different sources.
- *Using the excavator's site code*
  The site code can be incorporated into the accession number. However, as site codes tend to be alphanumeric you will need to ensure that that your information systems can logically handle these codes. A site code usually includes the location and date of the excavation, which can be an advantage, using it also avoids further proliferation of numbers on an object.

MDA Codes

The identity number should uniquely identify an object within your museum. As many museums use similar numbering systems the Collections Trust can issue your museum with a five-letter code that will uniquely identify an object to its museum within the UK.

eg CAMCD : 1991.24.1; CAMDC 1991.24.2; CAMDC 1991.24.3 ....

This code will identify which museum an object belongs to and should be marked on all objects with the accession number whenever possible. However, some objects are too small and can only be marked with the accession number.

Other numbering

Transfer of title number
This is the number on the transfer of title form confirming the transfer of legal title to the object to the museum. Transfer of title numbers can be a simple running sequence prefixed with a T. they are not attached to the object.

Exit number
This is the number on the exit form relating to procedures such as loans out, transfer, disposal etc. Exit numbers can be a simple running sequence prefixed with a X. and are not attached to the object.

Photograph number
This is the number on any print, slide, negative, digitised image file etc resulting from the photography of an object. Photograph numbers will probably be dictated by the format of the photograph and the way they are stored. The accession number of the object should be used to provide the link between the object, its documentation and any images. Original historical photographs will normally be given identity numbers derived from their accession number.

Conservation number
This is the number allocated by the conservation laboratory when an object is conserved. If your museum deals with several conservation agencies, you can prefix the allocated number with an institution code to avoid any risk of duplication.

Recording existing numbering systems
Other numbers may need to be recorded, for example, if you acquire a collection from a private collector, they may have already allocated a numbering system. Those numbers must be preserved in the museum

catalogue even though standard museum identity numbers will also be allocated. Some items in your museum may already be numbered using a now discontinued system; again, these should be noted. If items have been included in a special exhibition any catalogue numbers should be also recorded.

What if my museum's existing numbering system includes numbers that no longer make sense, or there are gaps in my accession register?

Many museums have old numbering systems that don't meet the standards laid out in this fact sheet. When this happens re-numbering collections is often suggested, particularly when 'intelligent' numbering systems have been used and these have ceased to be meaningful: perhaps a classification code which is no longer in use has been included in the accession number. Re-numbering is sometimes also suggested when there are gaps in the numbering sequence.

As a general rule re-numbering a collection is not worth the time and effort involved. It is better to start a new numbering system for new acquisitions and work with existing systems for objects that have already been numbered. At its most basic a numbering system should simply aim to provide a unique number for each object. This number will link the object to the information held about it. If the object can be identified and the accompanying information can be found, it doesn't matter if the numbers don't run in sequence or have different forms.

A Collections Trust Adviser says:

'*I was recently asked about renumbering objects in a collection where the accession number incorporated a location code. The museum was reorganising it's stores and wanted to renumber the entire collection. My advice to the museum was to leave well alone, as the renumbering exercise would have been extremely costly and the result meaningless. I suggested changing the format of all new accession numbers, and recording the change in a Procedural Manual, but continuing to live with the old numbers.*'

A Collections Trust Adviser says:

'*A previous curator re-numbered a small part of my museum's collection and it is still the bane of my life. They ran out of time and didn't complete the project... they didn't re-number all the pieces… the accession register and the collection catalogue still uses the original numbering system - so I can't work out if we have items missing or duplicated. The only reason for re-numbering an object should be if you discover that two objects have accidentally been given the same number.*'

Sources of help and advice

This fact sheet is from *SPECTRUM 4.0 Advice,* a support pack which is published on Collections Link at www.collectionslink.org.uk. Please refer to *SPECTRUM 4.0 Advice* for further help and guidance for other SPECTRUM 4.0 Procedures.

SPECTRUM 4.0 and Accreditation

SPECTRUM 4.0 is created by and for the museum profession to promote good practice in the management of museum collections. It is the result of contributions from practitioners in museums throughout the UK and internationally and is available free, for non-commercial use from Collections Link.

SPECTRUM 4.0 defines 21 Procedure*s*, which describe the management of objects in a museum collection. The Museum Accreditation Scheme requires museums to follow the 8 SPECTRUM *Primary Procedures,* which are*:*

- Object entry
- Loans in
- Acquisition
- Location and movement control
- Cataloguing
- Object exit
- Loans out
- Retrospective documentation