

The hospital Records Cataloguing Project at the Liverpool Record Office

KATE HALLETT *

Over the years a number of collections of hospital records have been deposited at the Liverpool Record Office (LRO).¹ These records are a rich source of social, personal, medical and institutional history. The hospital records cataloguing project aims to make these records more accessible to the public. In this paper I hope to give some background to this project, some idea of the range of material available in the collections, information on access issues, use that is currently made of the records and on future possibilities.

Liverpool is amongst the busiest local record offices in the country in terms of visitor numbers. It is a legal place of deposit for public records (which National Health Service and predecessor hospital records are defined as) and many of the major Liverpool hospitals, particularly those that are now closed have deposited records at the LRO over the years. Because of the heavy commitments to public duties necessitated by the high levels of researchers and enquiries, the permanent archival staff at the Liverpool Record Office had been unable to keep up with listing the hospital collections and the majority of collections were in a semi-listed or unlisted state and were therefore not accessible to the public. To remedy this situation the LRO applied for a grant from the Research Resources in Medical History Programme, a fund-giving body administered by the Wellcome Trust and British Library. They were successful in their application and were given a grant sufficient to cover the salary of an archivist for 8 months full time in order to list the collections. I was employed part-time as the archivist on this project between November 2002 and December 2003.

One of my first tasks when I started the project was to survey the collections to get a clearer idea of the work involved. The physical condition of the records was not too bad considering many records would not have been stored in ideal conditions prior to their transfer to the LRO. A minority of collections had been listed in full. These included hospitals such as the Ear, Nose and Throat Infirmary and the Liverpool Hahnemann Hospital. A further group were completely unlisted and these included the records of the Royal Liverpool Children's Hospital and St Paul's Eye Hospital amongst others.

The majority of collections were in a semi-listed state, including the records of the Liverpool Royal Infirmary and Alder Hey Children's Hospital. I

* Address for correspondence: 8 New Brighton Road, Sychdyn, CH7 6EF.

¹ The hospital records collections may be consulted at the Liverpool Record Office, Liverpool Central Library, William Brown Street, Liverpool L3 8EW.

found that working on collections that were already partially listed was problematic. I was not free to start from scratch and create a catalogue structure and assign reference numbers as I felt appropriate as the existing lists had already been used and researchers had cited some reference numbers. Adding records to an existing and not always ideal structure sometimes has resulted in a lack of order and a list that is not as straightforward as it could be for the researcher.

Liverpool Record Office uses CALM, the most widely used (in Britain) IT system for inputting archive catalogues and making them available to the public in online searchable form, but none of the existing hospital collection lists had been input onto the system. Fortunately copies of some of the existing lists had been sent off to the Access2Archives project at the National Archives. This project aims to create a national database of archive catalogues and these lists were already searchable on the Access2Archives website so I was able to re-import these lists into the CALM system at Liverpool Record Office and therefore save on what would have been a tedious re-keying job.²

All of the hospital collections that I assessed as needing listing work when I started the project have been completed. However since starting the project unexpected new deposits have arrived from various hospitals and I am currently working on these. Also additionally, the Liverpool Record Office houses the records of the Merseyside Record Office and these records include a number of hospital collections. Most notable are the records of Rainhill Hospital, a former asylum for the mentally ill which are heavily used. There are small amounts of unlisted Merseyside Record Office hospital records to be added to existing collections.

The range of material in the collections

The hospital records collections at Liverpool Record Office are all from hospitals that were or became part of the National Health Service. However some of these hospitals had their origin in the voluntary sector while others originated in workhouse hospitals provided by the Poor Law authorities. The collections are from both general hospitals such as the David Lewis Northern Hospital and from specialist hospitals such as the Liverpool Maternity Hospital. The date range of the records is mainly from the late nineteenth century to the 1980s, although there are some earlier records. Later records are still needed by current hospital administrations. Because the date range of some collections is considerable, the records show a change in function over the years for some hospitals. For example the earlier records of Sefton General Hospital are from the time when the institution was a workhouse rather than a hospital and admission registers refer to inmates rather than patients. Another example is

² <http://www.a2a.pro.gov.uk/>

from Princes Park Hospital, initial records refer to its role as the 'Home for Incurables' providing care for younger chronically ill women. Later records are from the hospital it became in its latter stages: a geriatric hospital for patients of both sexes.

The types of records that are available vary between collections. Many collections have administrative records including records of medical boards, nursing committees and visiting committees. Some collections also have financial records but these tend to be registers of donors or legacies or papers referring to fundraising efforts rather than series of account books. Patient records form part of a number of collections and these have access issues which I will refer to in a moment. Categories of patient records include in-patient and more rarely out-patient admission/discharge registers, which are often indexed by name. There are also series of ward and operation registers which are not usually indexed and are therefore less easy to use. The collections contain a number of maternity records. The information available for an individual mother can vary from merely a register entry confirming she was admitted and discharged from the labour ward on particular dates to the existence of a number of records for an individual mother giving details of attendance at ante-natal clinic, an account of the birth and details of her new baby.

There are a smaller number of records relating to mental health patients. The main source is records of Rainhill Hospital but there are some records in other collections, for example registers of patients detained under the Mental Health Acts at Sefton General Hospital. There are relatively few case notes in the collections. This means that following the progress of an individual is a more complex process of referring to a number of admission, ward, operation registers, etc and having the luck that all relevant volumes have survived. Staff registers are present in a number of collections and similar access issues apply to these as to patient records. Staff records available mainly refer to the nursing rather than medical staff although sometimes details of auxiliary professions and domestic staff are recorded. As well as registers of qualified staff there are a number of series of volumes detailing the training of student nurses.

I feel that the major discoveries of the cataloguing project have been the listing of large new series of patient and staff records. For example there are now series of around 150 x-ray casebooks from the Liverpool Royal Infirmary that stretch over 30 years. Long unbroken series of this nature offer greater possibilities that searching for details of a particular individual will be successful and also offer useful material for a researcher looking to draw conclusions about social changes or medical care.

Photographs are available in some of the collections. Group photographs of staff, particularly nurses and nursing events such as prize-givings are common as are photographs of the exteriors and interiors of hospital buildings, particularly to show the opening of a new hospital or extension. Scenes taken of patient care and of day-to-day life within the hospital are also present but are

less common. Finally there are records in the collections that do not fall into any of the above categories. These include correspondence, press cuttings, publications and a few assorted objects.

Access issues

Many hospital records at Liverpool Record Office do not have any access restrictions placed upon them. They can be ordered to view by any accredited reader at the LRO. Those records that are problematic are those patient or staff records that give details of identifiable individuals who are possibly still alive. Without going into too much detail about the legislation that pertains, the Data Protection Act 1998 places limitations on the use that can be made of personal data to protect the privacy of individuals but also gives a right of access to individuals to their own data. This Act was amended in January 2005 by the Freedom of Information Act 2000, which will give a right of access to recorded information held by public authorities. An exemption for information given in confidence will however prevent free access to personal records.

The practicalities for Liverpool Record Office are that the hospital records are only deposited at the LRO and their legal owner remains the NHS trust responsible for the hospital in question. Defunct hospitals still have an NHS trust responsible for outstanding legal issues including access to records. The LRO closes staff records to open access for 75 years and patient records for 100 years from the last date given in the record. These time periods are calculated to cover the life span of most individuals.

Any requests to access such records are directed to the relevant NHS trust. If the request is to see records relating to the enquirer him/herself they are usually given permission under the Data Protection Act. If the request is to see records of a deceased family member, there is a separate piece of legislation under which the NHS trust can give permission. Liverpool Record Office has to organise the physical access to the records once permission is granted. Often this means a staff member transcribing the relevant information for the enquirer as the volumes usually contain information about other staff or patients whose right to privacy must be safe-guarded. An enquirer wanting to access closed records not relating to themselves or a deceased family member, for example a researcher planning academic research would need to put their case to the NHS trust and the trust would assess whether the legislation would be breached by the proposed use. An issue would be how the researcher proposed to anonymise data used.

Use currently made of the records

Although the Liverpool Record Office keeps visitor statistics, no separate figures are kept specifically for hospital records. However staff perception is

that they are used on a regular basis but it tends to be particular parts of particular collections that are heavily used. The most frequently used records are admission and discharge registers which are popular with family historians. A number of volumes are more than 100 years old so there are no access restrictions upon them. The case papers in the Rainhill Hospital collection are also accessed frequently for family history purposes as they often include a photograph which may be the only photograph in existence of a family member. Maternity records are well used for various reasons, these include family history, tracing birth parents, gaining information for legal action against the hospital and wanting to know an exact birth time for astrological purposes. Academic usage of the collections is low, although there is some recent use, for example a thesis using Liverpool Maternity Hospital and Liverpool Royal Infirmary records.³

Future possibilities and conclusion

Since the cataloguing project began there is a staff perception that more hospital records are being issued, particularly from the now much enlarged Liverpool Royal Infirmary collection. Other developments are also likely to lead to greater usage of the collections as they will bring the collections to a wider audience. Firstly the online catalogue of all lists, which was previously only available within Liverpool Record Office and in local libraries is now available on the internet.⁴ Secondly the Mersey Gateway Project, based at the LRO has been digitising a large number of documents, photographs and artefacts relating to Liverpool from the LRO and other partner institutions.⁵ One of its sections will be 'Health and Welfare' and will use images of hospital records from the LRO collections.

The LRO is committed to maintaining the project's achievements as a requirement of the project funding and will be maintaining the lists as new deposits of records arrive. The Hospital Records Cataloguing Project has made unlisted material, previously inaccessible volumes on shelves, available to the public and existing lists can now reach a wider audience than before as they are now online and on the internet. It is to be hoped, that while respecting privacy legislation, more use can be made of this resource.

³ Emma Jane Latham, *Lying-In in Liverpool: a social history of childbirth c1914- 1948* (Edge Hill College, Lancaster University: thesis submitted for degree of Doctor of Philosophy, August 2001).

⁴ http://www.liverpool.gov.uk/graphics-version/root/A_Z_of_Council_Services/Libraries/Public_records/index.asp

⁵ <http://www.mersey-gateway.org/>