Notes for Contributors

What Does BNYA want to Achieve?

The first thing to emphasise is that BNYA is not doing historical research as such – there are a considerable number of interested individuals who all have their own projects and BNYA in no way wants to compete with their activities; some are historians, others are those with a personal interest, others just want to know more about the history of their boat. But we might be able to help them.

The fundamental aim is to preserve original source material which such historians may need to access as part of their research – the prime documentation. While there are clearly some reasonably coherent and well-structured collections of material which provide obvious source material, some are less so (i.e. not catalogued at a useful level of granularity – see below). And much additional material is distributed amongst individuals and organisations in a manner completely inaccessible to anyone other than the owner and even then the content may be not be recalled. Prime documentation is considered to offer the best provenance for authenticating valid information.

Having said that, any effort that has been made to pull together related information, in what are termed secondary sources, especially if it has been fully referenced, can provide a short-cut for research and is often the only remaining evidence available.

The other ambition is to make sure that the information is preserved in perpetuity. Whilst a box of papers and photographs may seem perfectly safe today, none of us can assume it will be so in 100 years' time when a researcher of the future wants to find something out. BNYA therefore wants to make sure it remains accessible with a programme to ensure it can be permanently accessed by updating formats in which it is stored. Whereas paper documents may have a long life (but can become fragile) contemporary records are invariably electronic and photographs can decay rapidly.

What Does BNYA do with the Information?

BNYA does not need (or even want) to store quantities of archive material. It can remain with the owner, especially as much of it may form part of family or organisational records which should be kept together. Having said that, if a set of material is looking for a new home we'll help to find one. Our aim is to know that it exists and where it is located. If required, our digitisation programme will enable researchers to view material without troubling the owner. Whereas it was initially thought that information may be published to and accessible from the web, it is clear that it could only ever be partial because of copyright issues, as all other archives have found out. The workload involved in sorting out copyright exceeds that required to obtain it and much of the information we are seeking is well within the period of the author's copyright. All information is therefore retained 'in-house' as a research facility. If owners want to approve users before it is made available, then BNYA will keep such information confidential and seek the necessary permissions; it is more important to BNYA to make sure that its existence is known.

Central to BNYA resources is a database. BNYA is not a traditional archive in which discrete collections of material are deposited; information arrives very much in dribs and drabs. This means that the dBase should be structured in such a way that information can be found using the dBase tools – high level descriptions of a box of material are inadequate. It is therefore

structured with extensive cross-indexing so that relevant sources of information can be viewed together, as well as the usual search facilities. This is achieved by indexing the content of an archive item to one or several core records. The dBase is very boat-centric but which in turn may be linked to other core records, such as past owners, events in which participated, class, organisations, designers, builders.

Archive items are classified as documents, comments, images and artefacts, each of which has its own data structure. Comments are distinct from documents since anecdotal evidence gleaned from on-line sources or informal communications is not stored as a document, but the full text is entered – much of this may be unverified but is information that should not be discarded.

As an example:

> A race report talks about boats entered, the organising authority, results, back stories of owners and is illustrated with pictures. The ID of that report is entered in the boat, owner and event records which are cross-referenced. This means that if you look at the boat record, for instance, one may be able to see which events it has participated in (which in turn may link to its competitors and information about them, and the results), who has owned it and when (which may in turn link to other boats they have owned and maybe other information that mentions them), its designer and builder (which in turn links to references about them and other boats), its essential measurement data, pictures of the boat (which may come from that report or other source) and links to any other references where the boat is mentioned.

Now this may often be incomplete, but provides a starting point for any research. One of the strengths of the dBase approach is that it works efficiently with sparse data so there is little overhead in only using a small part of the record structure.

Fundamental to being able to do this is what is called the granularity of the data; this means that the smaller the entity the more precise the cross-referencing can be. For instance a book about the Admiral's Cup will have huge numbers of boats and people mentioned, so it might only be linked to the event record (at least until such time as someone goes through it in detail). In contrast a magazine article about the design of a new class of boat may only mention the designer, builder, name of the prototype boat and its owner (who may have sponsored the design). Or a blog entry may only comment that 'my dad sailed on that in the 1973 Whitbread' – do they still have any pictures or stories to tell?

To further facilitate research, a document may be digitised and made searchable. This would not be embedded in the dBase, but the indexing should point users to the reference record which will identify the filename to open.

Geographic Scope

BNYA is focussed on the sport in the UK. However, sailing is a very international sport with many international events, boats are traded internationally, they have cruised to every far corner of the globe and the UK has been very influential throughout its history with many prominent designers and builders. The dBase therefore includes boats that have impacted on or been impacted by the UK sport in order to complete the picture. Also, for identification purposes, it is helpful to have details of non-UK boats that might otherwise lead to mis-identification.

What do we want from Contributors?

The bottom line is that BNYA would ideally like to receive complete catalogue entries for any item that forms part of a collection (in the loosest sense). In the first instance, a profile of the collection would help, but based on the granularity issue discussed above, the more detail that can be provided on each item, the more useful it will become.

It is acknowledged that for a collection with more than just a few items, this can become quite a big task. In the first instance maybe if just the top level info is listed or groups of items are described collectively then a researcher can go through the items to classify the contents in due course.

Typically, information about an item will be presented in a table format (maybe an Excel file or a Word document or similar) with each row containing:

- An ID (so that the actual item can be unambiguously identified)
- Type of item (such as document, photograph, artefact)
  and if a document (book, press cutting, newsletter, drawing, report, video, etc)
- Summary title
- Fuller description
- Date of origination
- Author/Publisher
- List of entities referenced in the item, ie:
  - List of boats and/or classes mentioned
    (and maybe designer/builder if appropriate)
  - Event(s) mentioned
  - Significant people mentioned
  - Organisations mentioned
- Copyright owner
- Any additional notes about the item or its content

Some collections may already be catalogued in which case any existing documentation can probably be used as is.

BNYA are wanting to build a panel of voluntary researchers, around the country, who would be prepared to do the classification, so if you would be willing or know of any likely folk, please let us know.

Conclusion

These notes hopefully summarise why BNYA is campaigning to protect material from going astray and ensuring its survival for future users. Also, how BNYA is amassing the information into a system that will facilitate its use.

It is wholly dependent on cooperation from anyone who sails or has sailing ancestors so we want to encourage involvement – therefore, do please contact us of you have any questions or need any help.

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