

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

THOMAS M. AITCHISON and JEAN AITCHISON

Transcript of Interviews
Conducted by

W. Boyd Rayward

at

Letchworth Garden City, Hertfordshire, U.K.

on

4 July 2000

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION
Oral History Program
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THOMAS M. AITCHISON

1923 Born in Glasgow, Scotland on 31 July

Education

1944 B.Sc., math and physics, University of St. Andrews, Scotland
1955 Associate of the Library Association, U.K.

Professional Experience

1948-1955 Courtaulds, Ltd., Braintree, Essex, U.K.
Librarian

1955-1964 British Aircraft Corporation, Luton and Stevenage, U.K.
Divisional Librarian and Information Officer

1964-1966 National Electronics Research Council, London, U.K.
Technical Officer and Director, SDI Project

1967-1988 Institution of Electrical Engineers, London, U.K.
INSPEC
Deputy Director, then Director

1980-1988 Peter Petergrinus, Ltd.
Director

1988-1990 J&TM Aitchison, Information Consultants, Letchworth, U.K.
Partner

Honors

1986 O.B.E. [Order of the British Empire]
1987 Hon. Fellow, Institute of Information Scientists
1988 Hon. Fellow, National Federation of Abstracting and Indexing Services

JEAN AITCHISON

1925 Born in Huddersfield, Great Britain on 6 October

Education

B.A. in honors history, London University

Professional Experience

1948-1949	Ministry of Town and Country Planning Library Assistant Librarian
1949-1950	Derbyshire County Library, Matlock Branch Deputy Librarian
1950-1951	Sheffield Public Libraries, Science, Commerce, and Technology Library Sub-librarian
1952-1954	Kingston-Upon-Hull Public Libraries, Commercial and Technology Library Librarian
1955-1964	English Electric Co. Ltd, Whetstone/Rugby Library, Leicester Chief Librarian
1961-present	Consultant From 1988 to 1998 operated under the name J & TM Aitchison

Honors

1982 Ranganathan Award for work on Thesaurus Design

ABSTRACT

Thomas M. Aitchison begins his interview by detailing his educational background and then continues by discussing how he first became interested in the field of information science. With the start of his career at Courtaulds, Aitchison got his first taste of working in a library. However, it was with the completion of the Library Association correspondence course that Aitchison gained the confidence and knowledge necessary to become a successful librarian. After applying and being hired for a divisional librarian and information officer with the British Aircraft Corporation, Aitchison became a member of the Aslib aircraft information group. He also joined the National Electronics Research Council and helped the Council develop a journal and numerous other projects. In January 1967, Aitchison helped form the Information Service in Physics, Electrotechnology, and Control [INSPEC] and became the information research manager. He also worked to mechanize *Science Abstracts* and organize the Direct Evaluation of Indexing Languages [DEVIL] project. He concludes his interview by sharing recollections of those who had the most influence on his career.

Jean Aitchison begins her interview by discussing how she first became involved in thesaurus development. She continues by sharing her first meeting with Shiyali Ramamrita Ranganathan and her initial impressions of him. Aitchison worked to complete three editions of *English Electric Faceted Subject Classification for Engineering*, between 1958 and 1961. With the help of others, she developed and reclassified many projects. She worked with Cyril Cleverdon on several publications and in March 1967 she began work on Thesaurofacet. She also worked to develop and improve the Bliss Association Classification system.

INTERVIEWER

W. Boyd Rayward is a research professor in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. He turned to librarianship after graduating in English literature from the University of Sydney. He received his Ph.D. from the Graduate Library School at the University of Chicago in 1973. He has held positions in the University of Chicago (where he became Dean of the Graduate Library School). He served as Professor and Head of the School of Information Library and Archive Studies and Dean of the University's Faculty of Professional Studies at the University of New South Wales in Sydney where he is now professor emeritus. He has published two books related to Paul Otlet, Belgian documentalist and internationalist, and a great many articles on history of national and international schemes for the organization and dissemination of information.

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Attended the University of St. Andrews, interested in math and physics. Joined the army but was discharged to work at the Admiralty Signal and Radar Establishment in Haslemere, England. Lost interest in a career as a physicist. Became librarian for Courtaulds Limited.
- 3 Organization Affiliations and New Projects
Became a member of Aslib. Set-up manual SDI [Selective Dissemination of Information] system which was greeted with enthusiasm. Joined National Electronics Research Council. Transferred to the IEE [Institute of Electrical Engineers].
- 6 INSPEC Formed
January 1967, INSPEC [Information Service in Physics, Electrotechnology and Control], a mechanized version of *Science Abstracts*, formed. The DEVIL [Direct Evaluation of Indexing Languages] project started. Thesaurus developed.
- 9 Director at INSPEC
Tensions with AIP [American Institute of Physics] rose. Became an agent for IEE primary publications. Competition and collaboration with different information committees. INSPEC grew.
- 20 Jean Aitchison Interview
Originally ran large library in the English Electric Company. Hoped to create classification system. Developed the *English Electric Faceted Subject Classification for Engineering* between 1958 and 1961.
- 23 Thesaurofacet
Started work on Thesaurofacet in March 1967. General Electric Company took over the English Electric Company and closed down most of the libraries. Thesaurofacet died.
- 25 Work at UNESCO
Helped develop UNESCO thesaurus. Made system for the Royal Institute of International Affairs, in London, published in 1991. Retired from the field.
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