



## Metadata (r)evolutions:

Asserting “recordness” in the  
archives of the UK government

**Andrew Janes**

What is a record? conference

Copenhagen, 18 January 2019



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Held by The

Ne

## Popular collections

Medals



Royal Navy  
service records

Wills



RAF combat  
reports

W

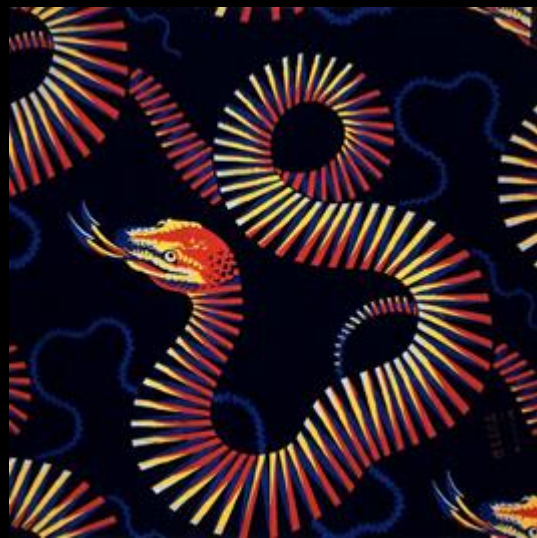
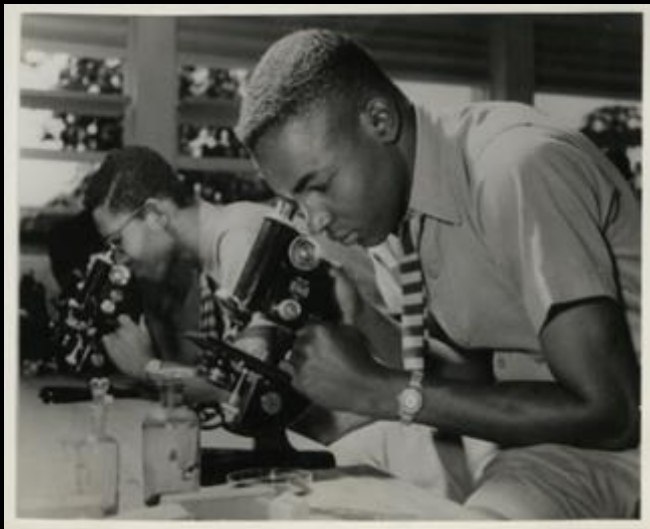
World War One army service records

Foreign and commonwealth records

First World War

## Held by

-  [The National Archives](#)  
(23,770,457)
-  [Available for download only](#)  
(8,971,297)
-  [Other archives](#) (10,735,154)



Original  
9/6/52-212

Army Form A. 45.

**CONFIDENTIAL**

PROCEEDINGS OF A MEDICAL BOARD  
WELSH HOSPITAL, SWILLY.

assembled at \_\_\_\_\_ on 25-6-17

by order of A.C.I. 478 dated 9/3/37.

for the purpose of examining and reporting upon the present state of health of

(Rank and Name) Lieut. Wilfred Owen (Corps) R.A.M.C./Barnes

Age 24 Service 1.9.12 Disability Neurasthenia (148)

Date of commencement of leave granted for present disability \_\_\_\_\_

Date on which placed on half pay for present disability \_\_\_\_\_

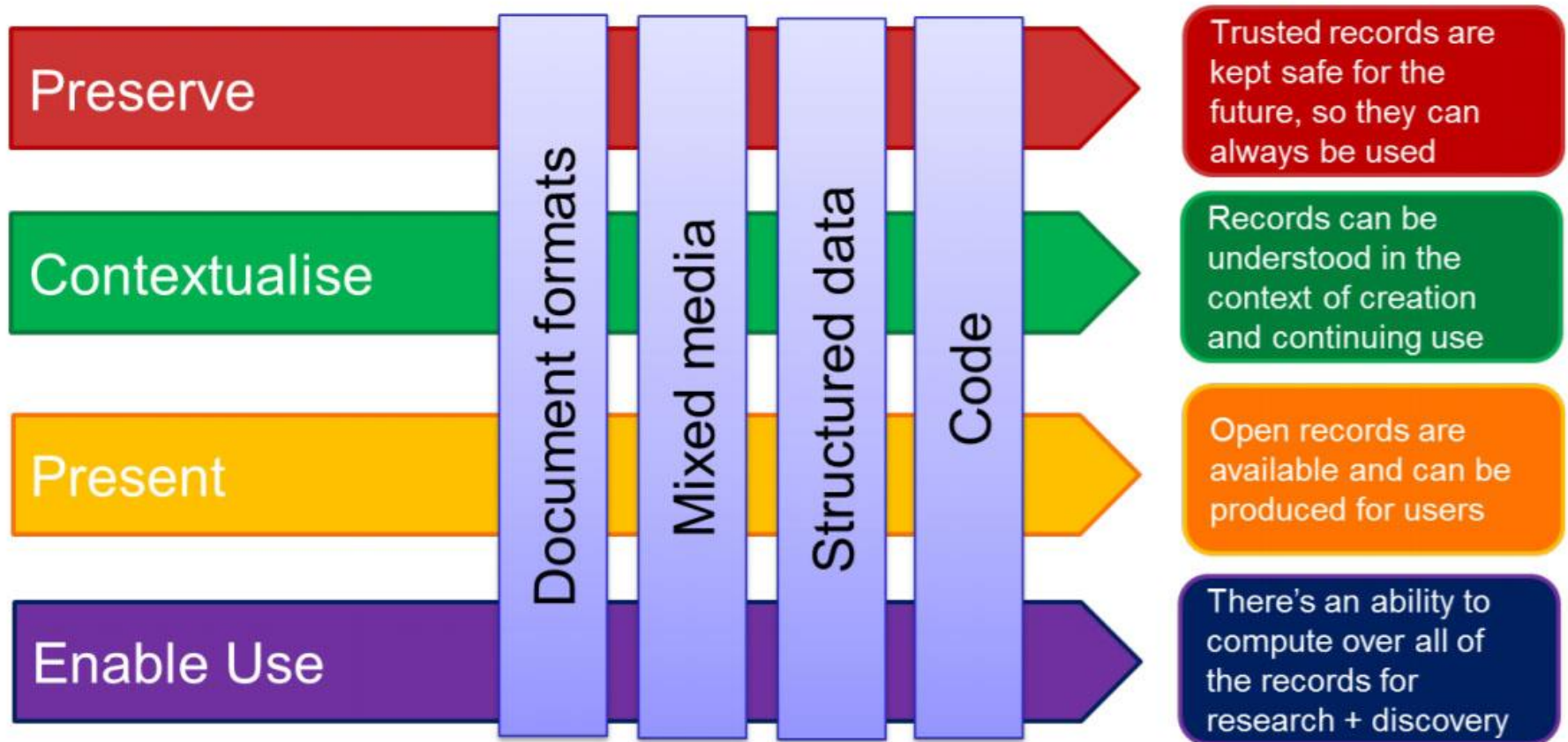
The Board having assembled pursuant to order, and having read the instructions on the back of the form, proceed to examine the above-named officer and find that

in March 1917 he fell down a well at Bouchoir, and was momentarily stunned. He was under medical treatment for a week, and then resumed duty. About the middle of April he was blown up by a small explosion while he was on the May 1st. He was observed to be shaky and tremulous, and his conduct and manner were peculiar, and his memory was confused. The R.M.C. sent him to No. 41 Sty. H. Gully where he was under observation and treatment by Capt. Brown R.A.M.C., Neurological Specialist for a month. On 2/6/17 he was transferred to No. 1 G.H. Street, and on 10/6/17 to the Welsh Hospital, Melly. There is little abnormality to be observed but he seems to be of a highly strung temperament. He has slept well while here. He leaves Hospital to-day transferred to Craig Lockart War Hospital, Balmuirg. For special notes will classify the above under one of the following categories, the probable period of absence for the higher category being stated.



CO 1069/312/39; E 36/273;  
EXT 9/104; WO 138/74; DL 25/689/646

# Digital strategy



[nationalarchives.gov.uk/about/our-role/plans-policies-performance-and-projects/our-plans/digital-strategy/](https://nationalarchives.gov.uk/about/our-role/plans-policies-performance-and-projects/our-plans/digital-strategy/)

# Metadata (r)evolutions

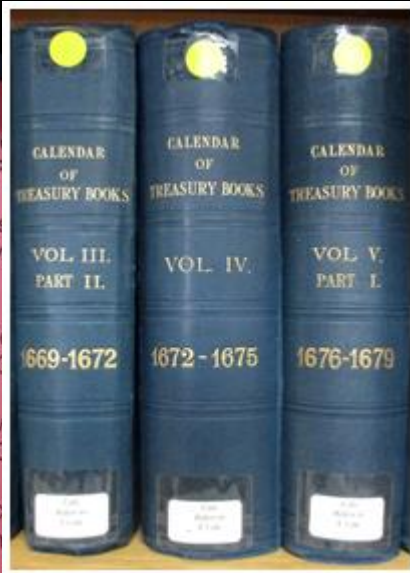
## Some digital disruptions

1. Digital description of traditional records
2. Adapting descriptive practices for born-digital records
3. Starting to re-think the presentation of digital archives

## Some reflections

- Archival description as a list
- Archival description as a map
- Archival description as a lens
- Archival description as a proposition
- Archival description as work in progress

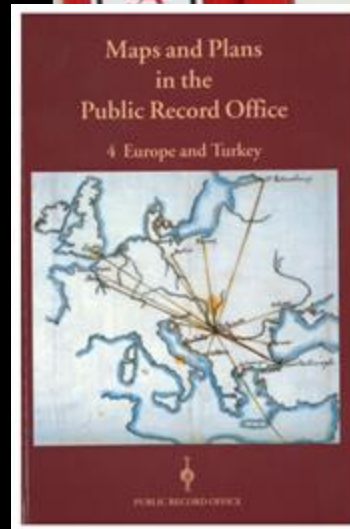
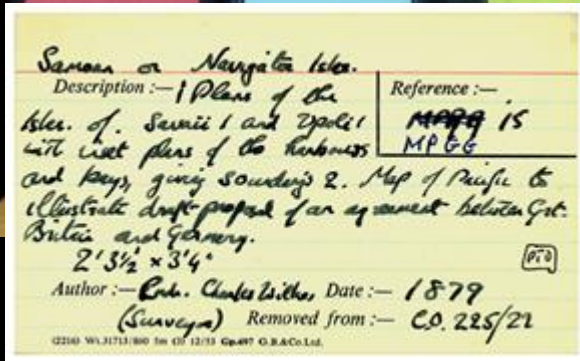
# Analogue description (pre-2000)



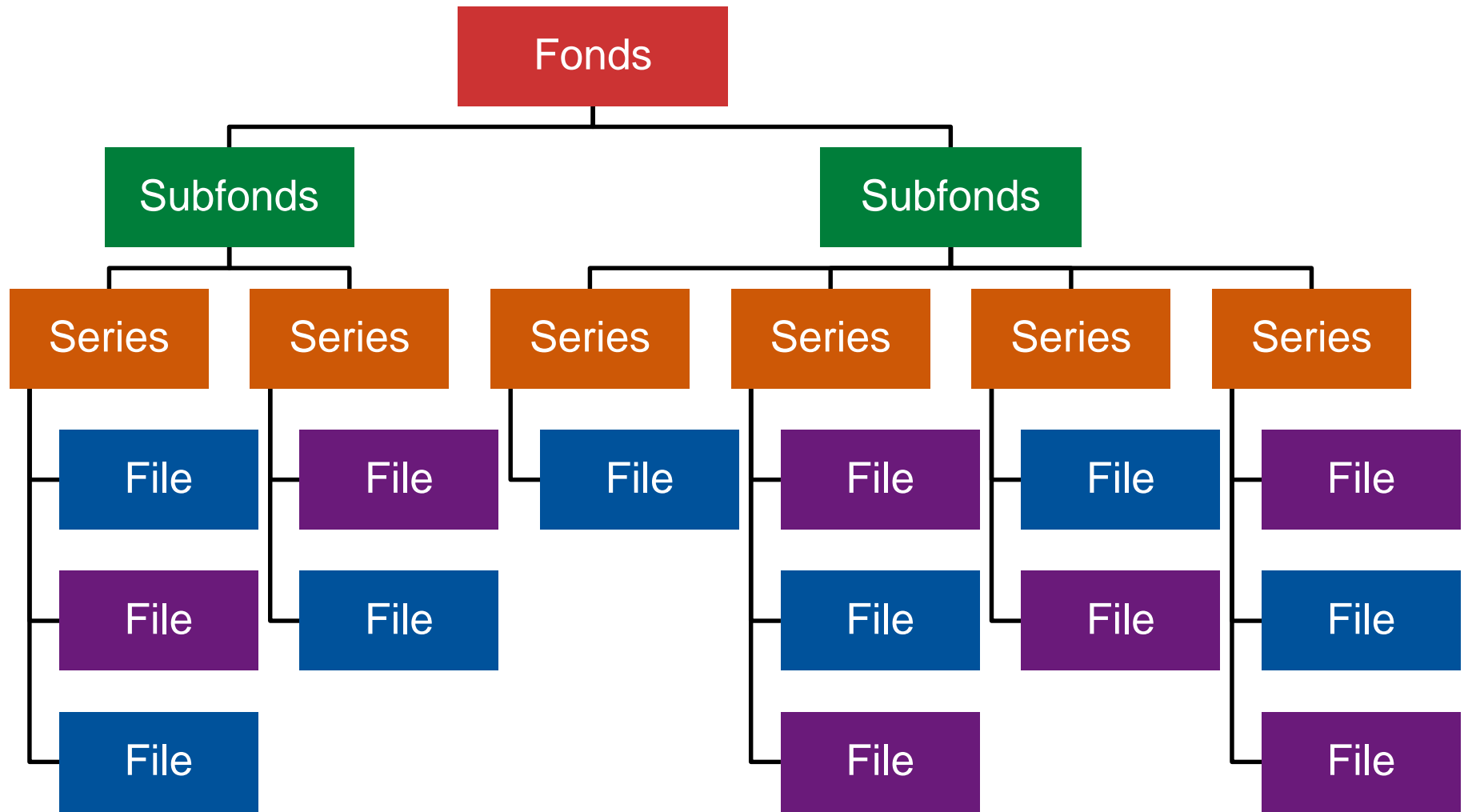
The Guide  
Part 3:

Index to  
Part 1  
&  
Part 2

A - K



# Disruption 1: a digital catalogue





# Some outcomes of creating a digital catalogue

- Explicit (mono-)hierarchical structure
- Blurring of provenance and function
- Adopted – and adapted – ISAD(G):
  - Closure, opening and delivery
  - Allow some repetition between levels
  - Descriptions instead of titles at file and item levels
- Legacy of variable richness and quality of description

# Disruption 2: adapting to born-digital records

- Existing processes needed adapting
- Response to practical challenges of new acquisitions
- Conforms to ISAD(G)
- Digital Cataloguing Practices position paper, March 2017:  
[nationalarchives.gov.uk/about/our-role/plans-policies-performance-and-projects/our-plans/our-digital-cataloguing-practices/](https://nationalarchives.gov.uk/about/our-role/plans-policies-performance-and-projects/our-plans/our-digital-cataloguing-practices/)

# Current approach to cataloguing born-digital records at The National Archives

- Curate series-level (and above) metadata as for traditional records
- Catalogue websites as **series**
- Catalogue other born-digital records as **series** and **files**
- Don't use **subseries** or **subsubseries** (except for hybrid series)
- Display file path/folder structure as **Arrangement** at file level
- Automate creation of **Reference**, **Title** and **Date** at file level
- Human-curated **Scope and content** description is optional

**You are in**

↳ The National Archives' catalogue

→ [ILB - Records of the Coroner's Inquests into the London Bombings of 7 July 2005](#)

→ [ILB 2 - Coroner's Inquests into the London Bombings of 7 July 2005](#)

→ This record (browse from here by [hierarchy](#) or by [reference](#))

Cata

Re

Reference: ILB 2/CFRB/Z

Refe

Title: Re 7 7 (1).msg

Title

Date

Date: 2011 Mar 07

Arra

Arrangement: This born digital record was arranged under the following file structure: ILB 2 >> Solicitor to Inquests emails RESTRICTED >> L - P >> London Ambulance Service >> January 2011

Hel

Legal status: Public Record

Physical description: 1 digital record

Closure status: Closed Or Retained Document, Open Description

Access conditions: Closed For 100 years

[Information review process](#)

**Help with your research**

How to [use this catalogue](#)

Need more context? View the catalogue description for [ILB 2](#)

# Extracting dates for born-digital records

Date exported

Date created

Date accessed

**Date last modified**

Date closed

Date transferred

Date published

Date opened

Date released

Date scanned

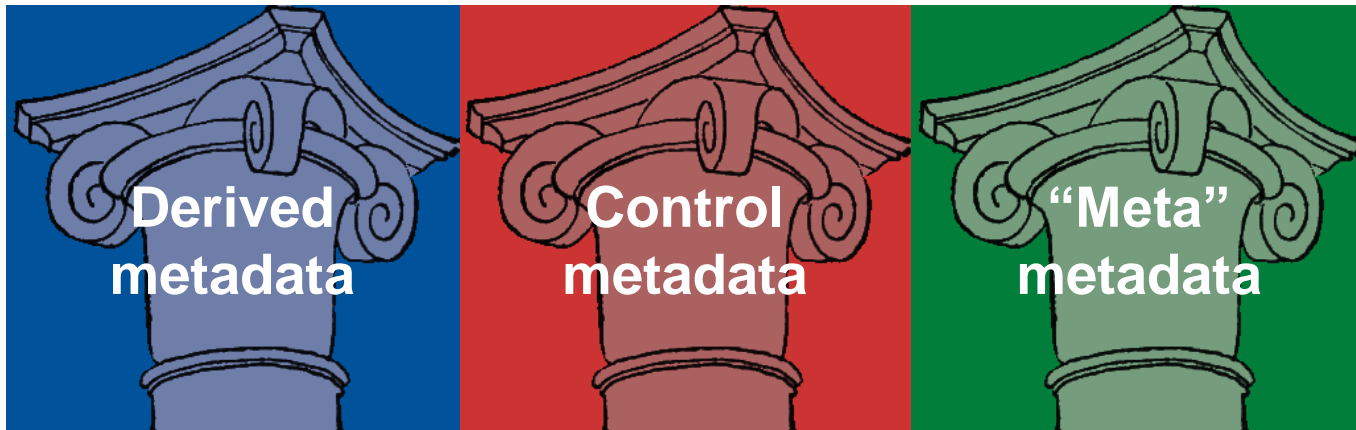
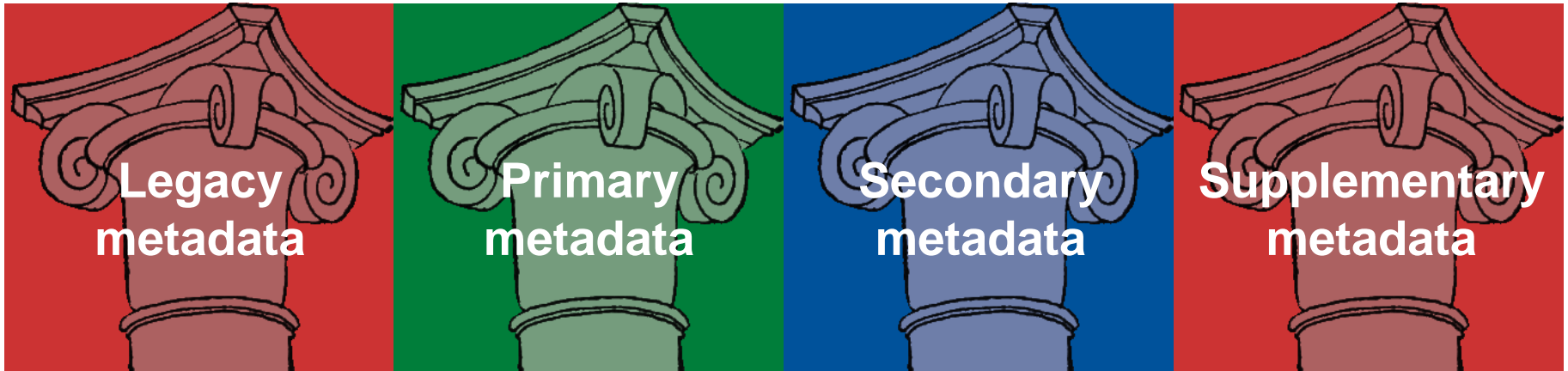
# Second-generation born-digital records

- Complex and diverse objects:
  - Embedded files
  - Objects composed of multiple file formats
- Amorphous accumulations (“digital heaps”):
  - Duplication and overlap
  - Mixed or unclear creators and provenance
  - Erratic relationships to functions
  - Main common characteristic may be the need for “archiving”

# Disruption 3: how can we better contextualise, present and enable use of digital records?

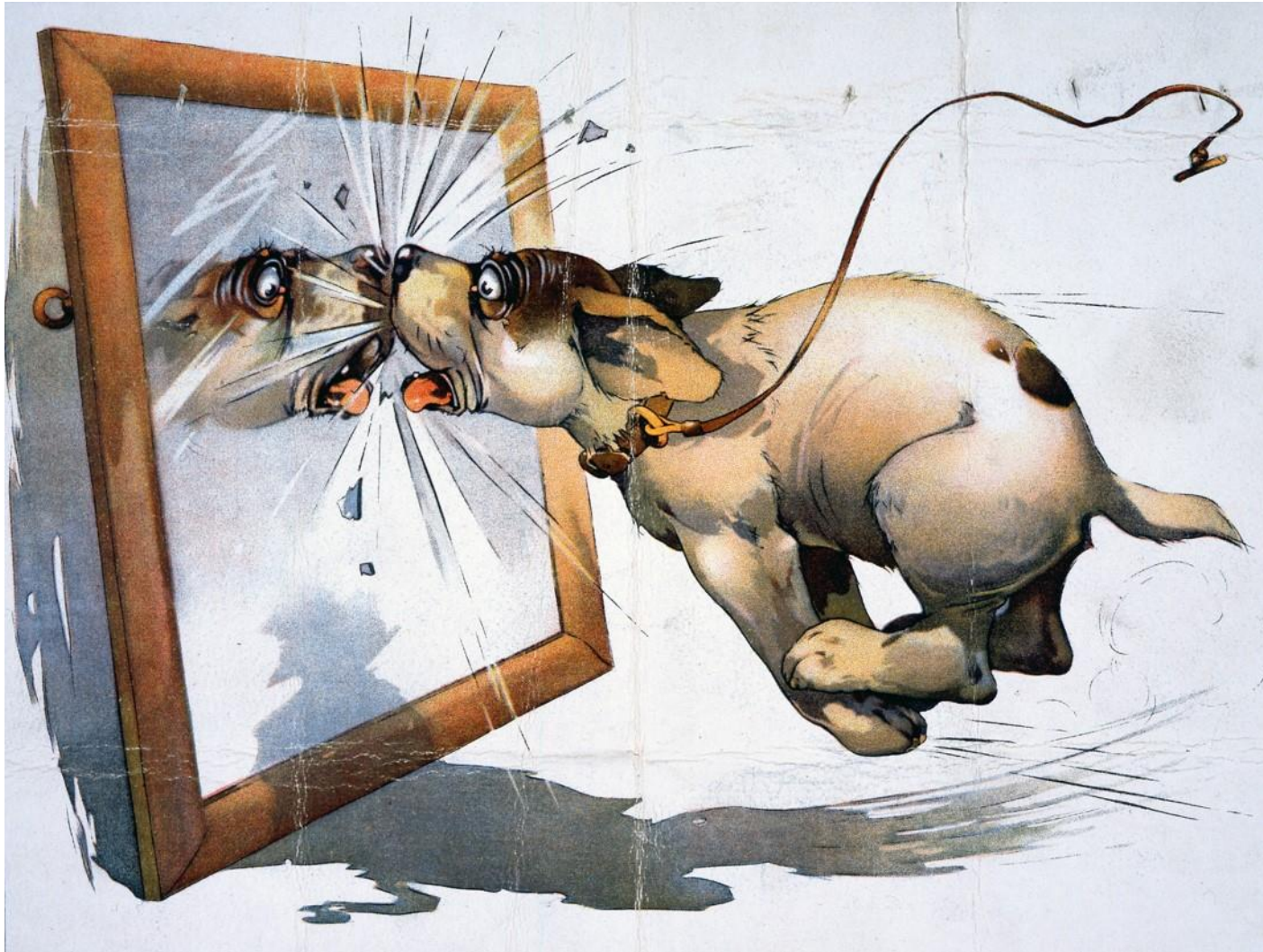
- Help to drive evolving best practice
- Treat digital records and associated metadata as a package
- Further automate the generation of metadata
- Richer context: provide more linkage across provenance
- Probabilistic description: embrace uncertainty
- Graded access: make closure and opening more nuanced
- Acknowledge origins and temporal change of metadata

# The seven pillars of metadata





# Reflections



# Archival description as a list

EMBASSY AND CONSULAR ARCHIVES

DENMARK: COPENHAGEN

Reference	Date	Description
F.O.749		Correspondence of the C
1	1915	British s
2	1915	Vice-Cons
3	1915	Withdrawn consulat
4	1918-1919	Miss M.S. Reilly: care of
5	1919-1920	Estate of Peter Hansen

- Listing?
- Cataloguing?
- Archival description?
- Metadata curation?
- Archival representation?

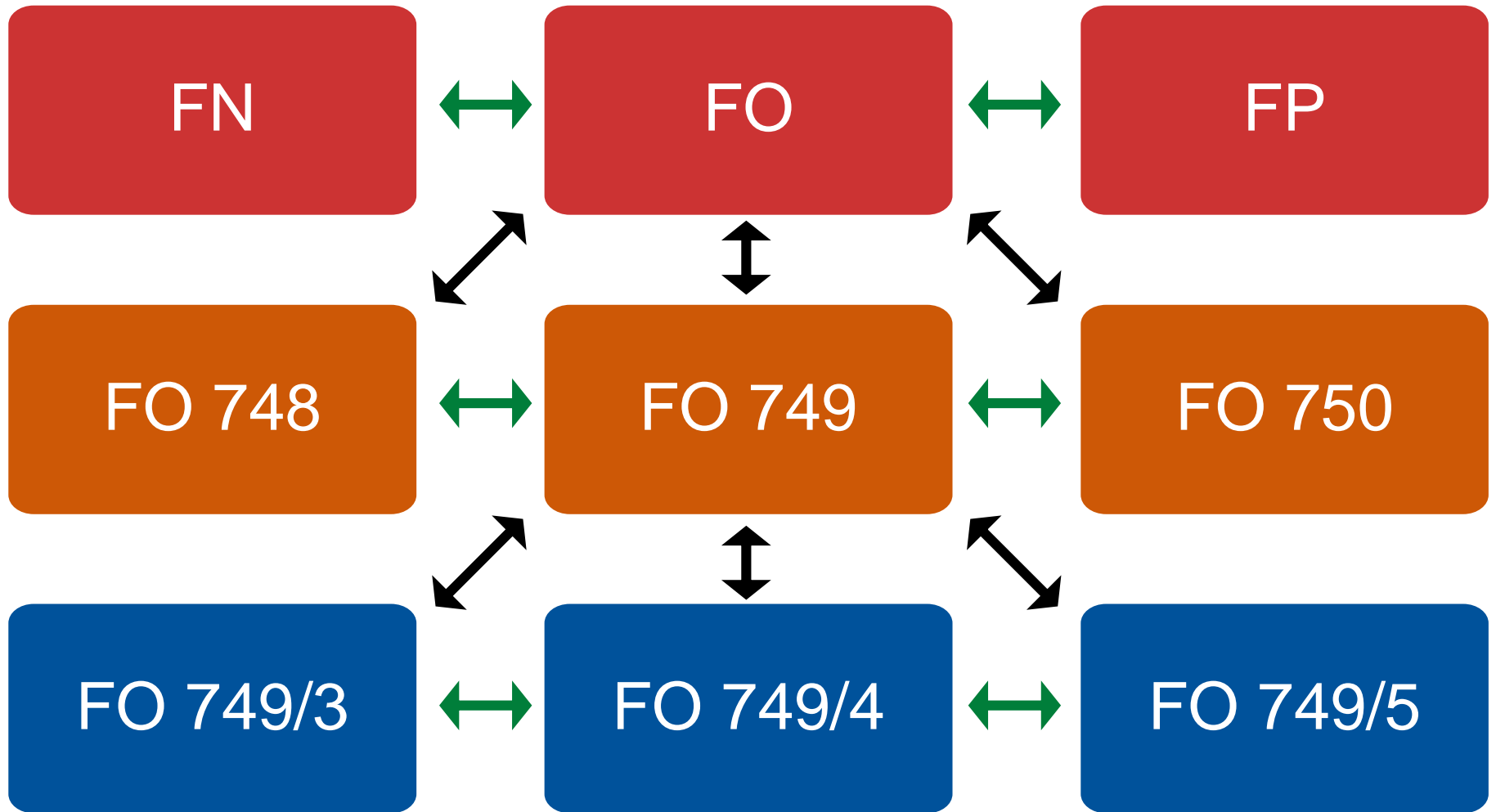
# Maps are representational



- Navigational tools
- Abstractions
- Privilege specific content
- Privilege specific relationships



# Archival description as a map



# Archival description as a lens



# Maps are propositional



J Krygier & D Wood, "Ce n'est pas le monde (This is not the world)". Ch 11 in *Rethinking Maps*, ed M Dodge et al (2009), pp 189-219

# Archival description as a proposition

## Catalogues and descriptive metadata assert:

- Facts about record content, structure and context
- The special importance of (aspects of) provenance
- Archival records (in all formats) are archival records

# A record (component)



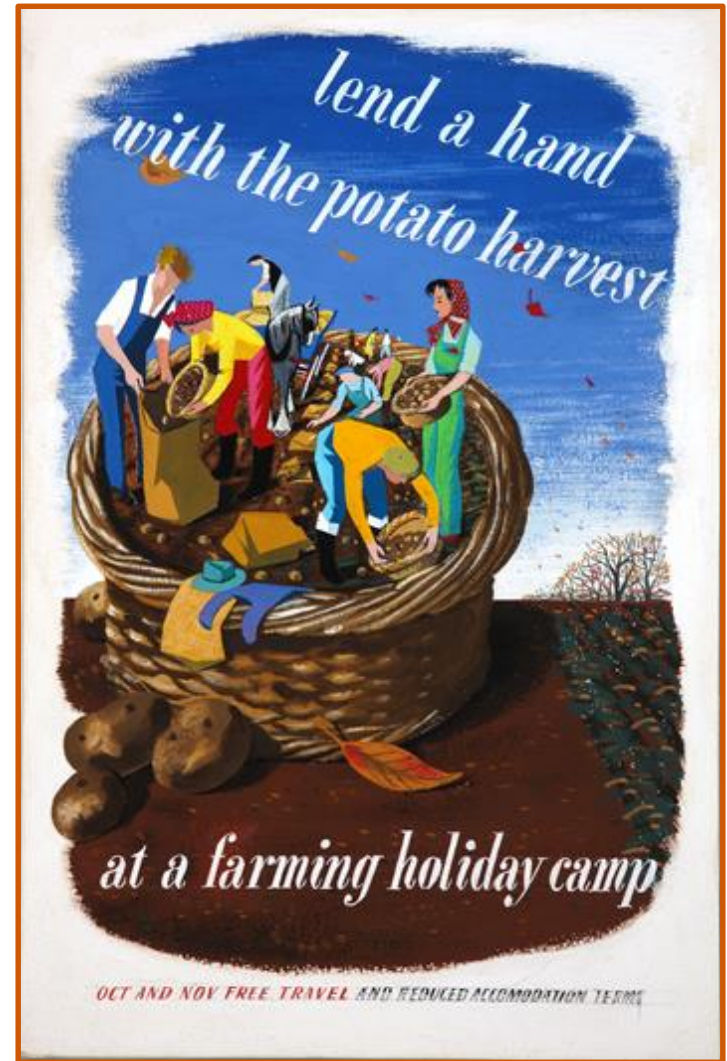
An object maintained since 1851 as part of a recordkeeping system



# Our proposition has been evolving

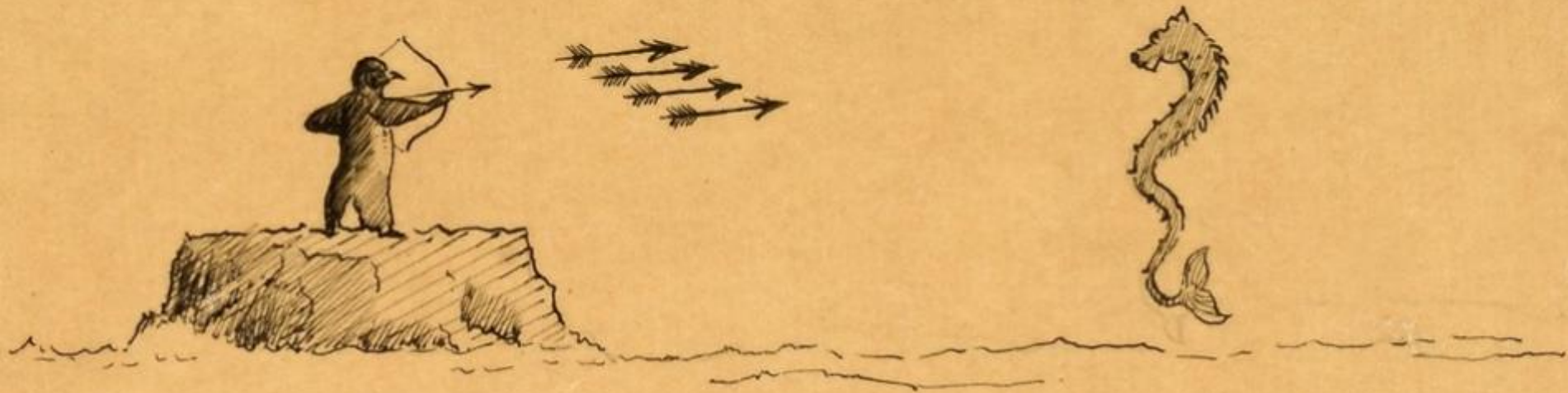
- Metadata is essential for asserting recordness
- Contextualisation is very important (but what does it mean?)
- Provenance remains at the heart of our work
- Aspire to greater transparency about metadata:
  - Origin
  - Change over time
  - Quality and (un)certainty

# Archival description as work in progress



*W. H. ...*  
Lieut Col (R)  
31. XII. 43.

# Thank you



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@cartivist