

Aeronautical History — Some Offbeat British Archives

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WHILE doing research on *The British Rigid Airship, 1908-1931; a Study in Weapons Policy* I had the opportunity in 1959 to become acquainted with certain British collections which fall outside the normal orbit of American scholars in London. A few words on these may be of interest to American archivists.

I first visited the Royal Aeronautical Society library and collections, of which the ebullient Frank Smith has charge. The collection of books contains many rare works published in the early years of flying. Besides these there are, secreted in various files and cupboards, a good many collections of private papers, photographs, and the like. These holdings should grow over the years, for in 1959 the society established a historical section. As I studied only the airship materials in this library, I cannot report on all its holdings. One of the sets of more general interest, however, is the small Baden-Powell collection, which contains also the papers of Air Commodore E. M. Maitland.

Among private collections that I was privileged to use were personal papers and Vickers materials on airships held by their designer, Dr. Barnes Wallis, at Vickers-Armstrongs (Aircraft), Ltd., at Weybridge in Surrey. Lord Ventry in Bournemouth has also collected a fair number of papers, including those of Air Commodore Masterman. Although full access to private collections is not always easy and depends usually upon a suitable introduction, the leading pioneer of British naval aviation—the late Rear-Admiral Sir Murray Sueter—was so taken with the fact that someone would journey all the way from the United States to talk with him that he even gave me his only relics of the airship business.

The War Office had none of the materials for which I was looking, but it does have an excellent collection of military books. More than that, it publishes its accession lists and makes these

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available to American libraries. By themselves they form a bibliography of current military publishing. Nor did I have any luck at the Admiralty; for, though its distinguished librarian, Lt. Comdr. P. K. Kemp, is also an author of note, the air files of the First World War were disposed of some time ago.

The Cabinet Historical Office gave me access to certain papers of the Committee of Imperial Defence, but only within the confines of the 50-year rule. This provides that at the end of a half-century qualified researchers may have access to official archives, including Cabinet papers. To gain admittance one must have a letter of introduction. Letters may be obtained through the Secretary of the Institute of Historical Research, through (I understand) the English-Speaking Union, or through personal contacts. I was told at the War Office that a letter from the provost or president of a university certifying the searcher as a serious scholar would often be sufficient. Essentially the archivists are guarding against sensation seekers who might embarrass persons still living, those seeking evidence for claims, and scandalmongers.

The Imperial War Museum has a fair amount of raw material and is the best source for wartime photographs. It is barred from collecting material on the armed forces in peacetime, but it does have a fine reference library, headed by Rose Coombs.

My work took me primarily, of course, to the Air Ministry. Here the whole system is under Squadron-Leader L. A. Jackets, who about five years ago moved from the official histories research program into the position long filled by J. C. Nerney. He has under him three branches.

The Air Ministry Library in the Air Ministry-Board of Trade Building in Richmond Gardens contains all the necessary reference works. Access to this is restricted only by the need to obtain a pass at the entrance. In the same building, but not within Dr. Jackets' bailiwick, is the Press and Information Service. This can sometimes supply older materials, and on its staff is Chris Cole, who collects the Air Ministry's historic photographs.

Over at 41 Tothill Street, near the London Passenger Transport Board's headquarters on Broadway, is the Air Historical Branch. To gain access to this one must get written permission from the Air Publications Branch, Air Ministry, and must agree to submit the whole of any manuscript in which materials from the Air Ministry's resources appear. For bonafide researchers the records of squadrons and other lower echelons are available. In 1959 the holdings of this agency were being indexed on cards

rather than in the memories of the staff. I found that the Air Historical Branch was a very pleasant place in which to work and that about a third of the Admiralty's early air materials were there.

Out at Hayes, in Middlesex, is the Air Ministry Archives, also under Dr. Jackets. Here all Royal Air Force and Air Ministry materials are processed, entered on accession sheets, and scheduled for final disposition. As the 50th year approaches, the items preserved here are sorted over. Some are sent to the Air Historical Branch, some go to the Public Record Office, and many are destroyed. In my own case pure chance led me there, and I arrived just too late to plead against the destruction of many of the older Admiralty records relating to lighter-than-air materials. I did find there, however, all the documents presented to the 1930-31 inquiry into the British rigid airship program.

My experience at Hayes made me try to point out to all concerned, both in England and in this country, the need for a better system of recording the contents of documents before the time of final disposition and also for a reappraisal of the rules governing the destruction of such records. This is not a problem for which anyone can feel blame. The handling of such records is an immense headache. But there is, from the historian's standpoint, at least a partial solution.

If, when records reach the archives (or even when a file is closed), the first and last papers could be extracted and put in a folder to be kept when the bulk is disposed of, there would be an essential record of when action was initiated, when the final decision was taken, and what that was. The difficulty now is that archivists, if not persons originally responsible, must run through the file to make sure that they have the pertinent papers and that the file is meaningfully labeled and cataloged.

Certain dossiers should be retained in their entirety. Let me cite the example of a file labeled "Insurance Papers." That happened to be the subject of the first letter. The rest of the folder, however, contained that very rare kind of information—the actual prices of rigid airships—an invaluable find.

Personally, I take my hat off to the archivists with whom I have dealt. They and librarians such as William Martin at the Air Historical Branch are the custodians of an enormous mass of material. And they can never be sure when someone may come to them with a new approach and will then protest because only the week before they finally threw away just the material for which he is searching!