# Record Repositories in British Universities

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THE UNIVERSITIES OF BRITAIN administer some of the most important collections of manuscripts and archives in the country and, as agencies for the discovery and registration of private collections, have made and continue to make a significant contribution towards the preservation of records. The article that follows is principally concerned with the means by which the universities discharge the functions of custody and discovery and the ways in which they complement and supplement the work of other archival institutions and agencies in Britain.

There are over forty universities or chartered degree-awarding institutions in Britain. Of these, twenty-four appear in the 1973 list of *Record Repositories in Great Britain,*[1] although the annual reports of some unlisted university libraries indicate that they too act as repositories for archives and manuscripts. The organizational structure of university repositories is diverse and cannot be summarized easily. On the basis of the 1973 list of repositories, five universities—Cambridge, Glasgow, Liverpool, Oxford, and St. Andrews—distinguish between the care of university muniments and that of other manuscript collections. In the first four institutions, separate officers discharge these functions; in the fifth, the same officer discharges both functions but is responsible for them to different committees. Archives and manuscript collections at Glasgow, Oxford, and Cambridge are housed and administered in the library and this is likely to become the case at St. Andrews;[2] at Liverpool, however, the functions are discharged in separate accommodation. In the other universities, repositories encompass both archives and manuscript collections and lie within the library establishment. In nine cases the officer-in-charge is designated *archivist* or *keeper of manuscripts.* In addition to repositories serving entire universities, a number are university-based; that is, they are attached to

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[1] Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, *Record Repositories in Great Britain* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1973).

[2] Information received from R. Smart, Archivist, University of St. Andrews.

university colleges, schools, or specialized institutes; the 1973 list includes six such repositories in London University, two in Cambridge, and one in Oxford.

An investigation of archival services in Britain made in 1968 produced returns from fifteen university and college repositories. About half were included in the library establishment.[3] The proportion of library-based repositories grew in the succeeding five years and developments in other universities since 1973 suggest that libraries are still favored for the location of archival services, a situation to be regretted since it effectively isolates an archivist from the mainstream of university administration and may limit his effectiveness in arranging for the transmission of inactive modern records to archival custody.

So much for the structure of the repositories; what of their contents? First, there are the archives of the universities themselves. The evolution of British universities was, until recent years, unsystematic and uncoordinated. In the words of the Robbins Report of 1963, the first comprehensive survey of higher education in Britain: "What system there is has come about as the result of a series of particular initiatives, concerned with particular needs and particular situations."[4] The diversity is reflected in the widely varying constitutions of the universities. The variations are principally in the details of constitutional forms, however; the majority of institutions share a broadly similar structure of government from which there are only a few notable exceptions. The common pattern has been called the "English civic model" and was developed in the provincial universities of the nineteenth century.[5] Within the pattern the supreme governing body is the court, the functions of which are now largely ceremonial; the effective governing body is the council; the main academic body, responsible for the teaching and discipline of students, is the senate; while academic organization at lower level is shared among faculties, boards of studies, and academic departments. Exceptions to this system are the federated University of Wales (although each of its constituent colleges enjoys a structure of government approaching the civic model); the Scottish universities, in which the supreme and effective governing body is the court, while in the four ancient universities, at least, a ceremonial equivalent of the English court is to be found in the general council; the highly complex University of London, composed of substantially autonomous colleges and schools in which overall control is vested in a court and senate; and finally Oxford and Cambridge Universities, in which the essential unit of organization is the college, governed by its Fellows.

The diversified character of British universities is reflected in their

[3] W. R. Serjeant, "The Survey of Local Archives Services, 1968," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 4 (1971): 314.

[4] *Higher Education Report of the Committee . . . under the Chairmanship of Lord Robbins, 1961–63.* Cmnd. 2154. (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1963), p. 5.

[5] H. Livingstone, *The University* (Glasgow: Blackie, Books on Organizational Analysis, 1974), p. 42.

archives. Nevertheless, six broad categories can be distinguished. First, there are records of foundation and endowment and of subsequent enactments affecting the constitution of the university. Second, there are records of government, generated by the deliberations of court, council, and senate or their equivalents; of their committees and subcommittees; of faculties or boards of studies and analogous bodies with coordinative or advisory functions; and of academic departments. Third, there are records arising from the implementation of the decisions of the governing bodies. Until comparatively recently, academic staff were often their own administrators; nowadays, matters of finance, law, and property are handled largely by the component departments of an administrative organization usually existing as a separate pyramidic institution within the university with the registrar or secretary at its head. Other matters, for example those relating to the admission and academic progress of students, are dealt with partly by administrative departments and partly by administrators or by teachers-turned-administrators within academic departments. Other matters, still, are the responsibility of specialized units within the university such as the library and, in recent years, the computing center, the students health center, and the careers advisory office. Fourth, there are the records created by the process of teaching; although in some forms these may not be strictly archival—in the Jenkinsonian sense—they are generally accepted as having a legitimate place among the archives of a university. Similarly, the fifth category, records created in the process of research, may not have purely archival quality; nevertheless, the Standing Joint Committee of the Historical Manuscripts Commission and the Royal Society have created a precedent by suggesting that records of scientific research should be preserved in universities.[6] Finally, there are the records of the institutions which reflect the political, social, recreational, and cultural life of the university community. At Oxford and Cambridge an additional category is necessary to cover records relating to the jurisdiction of the university in local affairs.[7]

Records from these six categories are to be found in most university repositories although the terminal dates and scope of the holdings vary widely. A sufficient number of early records has been published for their nature to be familiar, and in their modern forms many differ little from those generated by the government and administration of a local authority or a business. Some general observations on their nature may be essayed, however, and illustrated from archives in the writer's care; these span five centuries, emanate from three universities, and contain most of the features of university archives elsewhere.[8]

[6] R. H. Ellis, "The Historical Manuscripts of Science and Technology," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 4 (1970): 91.

[7] See H. E. Peek and C. P. Hall, *The Archives of the University of Cambridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 53 et seq.

[8] The writer has in his custody the records of two independent institutions, King's College and University, Aberdeen (founded 1495), Marischal College and University,

In general, it can be said that records of government and administration have shown a steady increase in volume, accelerating in recent years, accompanied by a marked elaboration in form. These features reflect developments in governmental and administrative organization that are a response to the increasing complexity of the tasks which society has encouraged, and indeed instructed, the universities to undertake, burdens such as expansion in numbers and the widening of fields of study. For example, the earliest surviving financial records of the universities of Aberdeen, dating from the late sixteenth century, are contained in the *Liber rationum* and rentals. Of the eighteenth century, separate series of accounts relating to mortifications, rents, and the library are found, supplemented by bundles of vouchers; during the nineteenth century, series of general ledgers, cash books and estates' ledgers, in the form of bound volumes with titles and serial numbers, were instituted; in 1944 their format changed and the information in each series was recorded on loose leaves which were subsequently parceled or bound in unlabeled, unnumbered binders; subsequently the accounting system was altered and existing series were subdivided or assimilated into others; today much of the information is computerized and if the records are produced as series at all it is as hard-copy printout.

Unfortunately, few early record series are complete. Their fragmentation is due partly to neglect, as in the case of the Marischal College matriculation register which was dispatched to the law courts in Edinburgh in the early eighteenth century and not recovered until 1871; partly to accident, as in the case of plans for the rebuilding of Marischal College that were destroyed by fire in the architect's house; and partly to depredations during political or religious turmoil, which may explain gaps in the minutes of both universities around 1715. Also, university archives may be supplemented by records kept elsewhere, notably when a university owed its foundation to personal or civic initiative or was subject, like Marischal College, to an element of civic influence.

In compensation for the gaps there is often an overlap in other early series, notably among lecture notes and student exercises. At Aberdeen, for the eighteenth century alone, there are about 120 items; 35 are lectures given at King's College and 26 are lectures at Marischal; 15 are lectures at Edinburgh, 2 at Glasgow, and 1 at St. Andrews; 2 are medical lectures given in London and 22 are lectures given in continental universities, principally Utrecht and Leyden.

The categories of university archives are often augmented by amorphous collections of personal papers—correspondence, accounts, and diaries—of scholars and alumni and their families, or of manuscripts accumulated by them. Although the relationship of such material to the archives may sometimes be tenuous, it is more often likely to

Aberdeen (founded 1598); and the records of the present University of Aberdeen which was created by the "fusion" of these institutions in 1860.

be a valuable supplement; and on these grounds the continued acquisition of such collections by university repositories may be justified. Thus at Aberdeen, the fifteenth-century library of the founder, Bishop William Elphinstone, illuminates his scholarly interests and hence his conception of the studies to be pursued at his foundation; and the letters and papers of the eighteenth-century writer and scholar James Beattie illustrate his activities as a professor in Marischal College in matters which are covered only cursorily by the archives.

In addition to the archives created or inherited by a university itself and to ancillary collections, university repositories hold a wide variety of historical and literary manuscripts which have been given or deposited on loan. The vast scope of such holdings in certain universities has brought their repositories international renown characterized by the reduction of their titles to a familiar word or phrase such as the Bodleian, John Rylands, or the Brotherton. They are notable, moreover, not only as repositories of manuscripts of national importance, but for extensive local collections as well. The value of the Bodleian Library to the local historian, for example, is well illustrated in a recent guide to Oxfordshire source materials.[9] Other university repositories contribute significantly also to the preservation of records of local interest; a glance at the most recent edition of *Accessions to Repositories* and at the list of reports added to the National Register of Archives will indicate the scale of their activities.[10] The circumstances surrounding such activities differ markedly between Scotland and England, a fact which does not seem to be widely appreciated.

In Scotland local-authority record services similar to the county and city record offices of England were unknown until very recent times, and they are still far from comprehensive although the current reorganization of local government may alter the position. In the meantime the universities, ancient and modern, have in varying degrees acted as repositories for private records of local historical interest. Their role has of late become more significant as the Scottish Record Office, traditionally the repository for private as well as public records, has tended to encourage the preservation of local records in the region to which they pertain.

Aberdeen's commitment has been extensive; approximately half of the time of the repository staff is spent in the administration of such material. The university has acquired extensive collections of estate and business records; a single deposit of advocates' (solicitors') records, made recently, comprised over a hundred deed boxes and several hundred volumes relating to about forty estates and commercial enterprises. Also, the repository holds records of the northeastern branches of almost every trade union, and a wide range of family and literary papers and records relating to the colonial undertakings—plantations,

[9] D. M. Barratt and D. G. Vaisey, *Oxfordshire: A Handbook for Students of Local History* (Oxford: Blackwell, Rural Community Council, 1973).

[10] Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, *Accessions to Repositories, 1972* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1974).

factories, for example—of local families. The same categories are well represented in other Scottish universities. In a single year, 1969, Edinburgh University acquired the records of a tweed factory, a distillery, and two shipping lines from the nineteenth century, as well as those of the publishing firm of Thomas Nelson.[11]

Three universities are involved also in surveying records in private hands and, although this is not the responsibility of their archivists, the closest possible collaboration between repository staff and the registrars of the surveys is essential. In the absence of local-authority repositories in Scotland it is common practice for owners to retain private records in their custody, making proper provision for their preservation and permitting, as an additional precaution, the compilation of a survey so that their condition might be monitored and their content publicized. In 1946 the National Register of Archives (Scotland) was established as a function of the Scottish Records Office to make such surveys. Recently its work increased to such a degree that the help of the universities was enlisted in undertaking surveys of records in their regions. The surveys now in operation are the Western Survey, based on Glasgow; the Eastern, on Dundee; and the North-Eastern, on Aberdeen. The extent and importance of their work can be illustrated from the results of the Western Survey. It was established in 1970 and has since completed 154 surveys, including the records of the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders, containing about 150,000 technical drawings.[12]

English universities have also been active in collecting and surveying local historical records and other records with a common theme, but these activities have less justification. England has for twenty years had a fully developed local-authority records service which ideally should have rendered the involvement of the universities with any but their own archives and ancillary collections superfluous. There are some universities, such as Nottingham, which anticipated the establishment of a local record office and can therefore claim a prescriptive right to collect and administer local records; there are others, such as Exeter and Oxford, which have been assigned a particular role in the local record-service, in these cases that of diocesan repositories. Elsewhere, however, it has been claimed—as at the University of Warwick, which recently began to collect and survey records—that the pressure of routine work on local-authority repositories prevents their staff from carrying out the fieldwork among records which current forms of historical, economic, and sociological research require.[13]

University-based survey and collection projects are of three types. First, there are those which survey records and acquire them for deposit in the university and nowhere else. The University of Reading, for example, organizes three such projects, an archives of historical farm records, of printing and publishing records, and one of modern

[11] Ibid., *1969* (1970).
[12] Information received from The Secretary, National Register of Archives (Scotland).
[13] The Library, University of Warwick, *Report for the Session 1972–3* (1973), p. 3.

political papers.[14] Another example is the Oxford Colonial Records project, which existed from 1962 to 1972. It was primarily concerned with records arising from administration, or life, in the colonies and overlapped the archives services of developing countries rather than those of Britain.[15] A final example is the Centre for Military Archives in King's College, London, established in 1964 for the survey and acquisition of papers of recent military activity which do not form part of a continuous family archive.[16]

Second, there are those projects in which universities either accept records themselves or channel them towards appropriate repositories. An example is the Modern Political Records Project which is now associated with Nuffield College, Oxford, and the British Library of Political Science, at the London School of Economics. Founded in 1967, and financed by the Social Science Research Council, it has undertaken the location of extant papers of all persons and institutions that had significant influence in British public life from 1900 to 1951.[17]

The third category of projects is that in which papers discovered by survey are deposited in existing repositories. The classic example is that of the Contemporary Scientific Archives Centre, which is sponsored jointly by the Royal Society and the Historical Manuscripts Commission, but is accommodated in the Indian Institute of Oxford University and receives some financial support from the university.[18]

It cannot be denied that the survey and collection projects which have been described have saved and made available material in England which might otherwise have been lost; but it is also possible that where local and personal records are concerned at least, the same result might have been achieved by a vigorous application of the powers and facilities of the existing national and local-authority record-services supported by infusions of money from trusts and foundations and the advice, but not the actual participation, of university staff.

The distractions which the accumulation of non-university records provide to repositories in Scotland and England are all the more regrettable in view of the urgent problem presented by the management—more appropriately, lack of management—of modern records created by the universities. Only in a few university repositories is there provision for the transfer of records from the administrative and academic departments for preservation as archives.

Attention has recently been focussed on the problem by a survey and

[14] Information received from J. Edwards, Archivist, University of Reading.

[15] J. Hall, "The Oxford Colonial Records Project and the Research Worker," *African Research and Documentation* 2 (1973): 7–9; J. J. Tawney, "An Exercise in Partnership: The Oxford Colonial Records Project and Rhodes House Library," *Bodleian Library Record* 9 (1974): 113–25.

[16] Based on a prospectus published by the centre in 1969.

[17] Based on a prospectus issued by the project in 1973.

[18] Contemporary Scientific Archives Centre, *Progress Report*, no. 1 (1973); no. 2 (1973–74).

report on the records currently produced and held by the colleges and administrative departments of the University of London, made by a university study group between 1971–73.[19] Questionnaires were sent to the university's thirty-six constituents—colleges, schools, research institutes, medical institutions, and administrative departments. The response revealed that in most of the institutions surveyed the head of the administration assumed responsibility for the maintenance of records, but that no systematic disposal of inactive records was undertaken; that in some institutions certain classes of records were administered through the library; and that in a very few cases an archivist was entrusted with the supervision of a records-management scheme. The study group produced a series of exemplary recommendations, emphasizing the need for coordinated records management within and between institutions of the university, the application of management schemes to academic departments as well as to those concerned with administration, and the delegation to a senior officer in each institution of overall responsibility for records management within it.

The survey singled out Imperial College for its achievement in the management of modern records,[20] an achievement providing an example of one level which has been reached. There, the records officer in the modern records office has the oversight of most modern records produced by administrative units. A schedule of routine files has been worked out and these files are destroyed after ten years. Current files passed for storage are first weeded if this is thought desirable. All files in store are examined for retention or disposal every five years on an approval pattern. Older records are the responsibility of the archivist, who inspects all files and makes the final decision on destruction, weeding, and retention. Even at Imperial College, however, the records of academic departments do not come under the direct control of either archivist or records officer.

A higher level still has been reached by the University of Reading. There the archivist and his assistant have been guided by a university records committee consisting of the registrar, the bursar, the head of the department of history, and the deputy vice-chancellor. The archivist has examined the records of each university department, listing, boxing, and storing the semicurrent records which will ultimately be housed in a university records center in the university library. Moreover, a records handbook has been produced in draft giving recommendations for the disposal of all papers produced or received in the university.[21] The Universities of Liverpool and Nottingham have also made substantial advances in this direction.

This, then, is the situation at present. In Scotland and England a number of university repositories exist. In most cases their function is to administer the older archives of their institutions; in a few cases only

[19] University of London, "Report of the Study Group on the Archives of the University" (1973).
[20] Ibid.
[21] Information received from J. Edwards.

is there a close relationship between the archivists and the university administration which permits the systematic transfer of inactive records for preservation as archives. The repositories are often responsible also for the care of collections of local historical records or collections with other common themes which have been and are being acquired by the universities either incidentally or as the results of deliberate record collecting and surveying. It has been argued that justification may exist for such projects in Scotland where there are few local record offices, but their validity in England has been questioned.

What does the future hold? It seems possible, and it is indeed desirable, that university repositories will be forced to concern themselves less with older archives and deposited records and more with the establishment of schemes of modern records management, as some have already done. Such a change is not a simple undertaking.[22] The management of records of university government, of the nonacademic activities of the university community and of some administrative records—notably those of financial transactions, the administration of property, the maintenance of buildings and plants, and the employment of wage-earning personnel—presents little difficulty. Records such as these have their parallels among those of local authorities, commercial and industrial undertakings, and social or cultural institutions and are unlikely to create problems of appraisal for which solutions cannot be formulated from precedents established elsewhere.

Much more difficult to appraise are records relating, for example, to the appointment and promotion of salaried staff and to the admission and progress of students. There is, for example, the problem of duplication. Records in these categories may exist in several overlapping series. Details of a student's progress, to take one common instance, which may be summarized on a master record held in a registry, may also appear, in part at least, in ancillary record-series kept in faculty or departmental offices or in the personal files of a tutor. At these levels, however, they may be combined with other data which is not recorded on the master record and the ancillary series may thus have unique archival quality of their own.

Then there is the problem presented by the existence of university statistics. Following the recommendation of the Robbins Committee, the amount of statistical information acquired and published about higher education has been increased, notably as a result of the establishment of the Universities' Statistical Record, in 1968. Any appraisal of records relating to staff and students must take into account the data which is held centrally; and the economics of preserving and retrieving from a particular record-series must be compared to those of applying for and using statistical data from the USR.

A third problem arises from the wide variation in the compilation of

[22] This topic is discussed in greater detail in the writer's article "The Management of Modern University Records" to be published in *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, in 1975.

record-series from university to university. Records of examination marks are an obvious illustration. Recent research projects concerning student achievement in examinations have favored the use of pass/fail rates or degree-classes as criteria since the correlation of marks awarded has proved unsuccessful. It can also be argued, however, that studies of marking may eventually be used to discover the respective values assigned to degree-classes by different departments within a single university or by departments of a single discipline within several universities.

The disposal of these records largely depends on the value which is placed upon them by scholars, since their administrative value is limited. Unfortunately, scholars' opinions of such records seem frequently to conflict. A statistician will advise against the preservation of a class of records because it is potentially uneven in content and therefore unsuitable as a basis for a quantitative enquiry; a historian may press for its retention since he can use it for an impressionistic study. One educationalist will argue that details of individual academic achievement are not worth preserving in view of the wide variations in grading which may invalidate their use for comparative studies; another will point to the potential value of such records once a suitable formula has been evolved to nullify the effect of this disparity. Yet only the joint appraisal of these records by scholars, educationalists, and administrators can enable the archivist to decide with any degree of confidence upon their disposal. It is conceivable, therefore, that in the not-too-distant future, archivists in universities will have to take the initiative, as their counterparts in local government and business have already done, in devising a system through which the knowledge and expertise of those who create and use university records can be pooled and tapped when guidance is required.