

Archives in Britain: Anarchy or Policy?

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THERE IS A DICTUM of the late Sir Hilary Jenkinson which is graven on the heart of every professional archivist in Britain but which hardly any professional historian has ever heard of. "The Archivist," Jenkinson wrote, "is not and ought not to be an Historian." Jenkinson was a very great archivist (when off duty he was an excellent historian too) and his dictum is a sound one; the approach, the philosophy, of the archivist, the keeper of historic records, is different, subtly but significantly different, from that of persons who use these same records for research, whether historians or others. But if the archivist is not a historian I have every personal reason for hoping he may be permitted to become one, having spent the first half of my working life to date as an archivist in local and national repositories in Britain, the second half as an academic historian.

My first post was in the County Record Office at Warwick, a local repository in the English Midlands, where I spent three years, happily and instructively. It was there that I first met many friends and future colleagues in the historical profession as I fetched for them, from the fastnesses of basement strongrooms, what sometimes seemed innumerable boxes of family papers and other records. And it was there that I first came up against the problem of dust and archives, one problem as familiar to the historians who use the records as to the archivists who look after them. I remember long talks with the County Archivist on how best to clean the records. Archive technology was then in its early youth, and in the end we opted for a large old-fashioned feather mop which was duly bought at the stores from the Office's petty cash. So it became my job every Monday

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morning to descend to the strongrooms with Mrs. Thompson, the office cleaner, she with the feather mop and I with a large bunch of keys. I would unlock the cupboards, get out the books and the boxes and the bundles and the rolls, Mrs. Thompson would dust them, and then I would put them away again. And being, I suppose, already a pedagogue in the making I would try to talk interestingly about the records we were dusting; so we would have fascinating conversations rather like this:

Myself: Just fancy, Mrs. Thompson, these are the drafts of the minutes kept by the clerk of Quarter Sessions between February 1624 and October 1632.

Mrs. Thompson: Really, Mr. Harvey, you don't say (*brushing away vigorously with the feather mop*).

Then, one day, we came to a cupboard that looked as if it hadn't been opened for years and years; at the bottom was a heap of brown-paper parcels of early 19th-century records, absolutely covered in dust. We looked at them and got one of them out, and Mrs. Thompson said, "Gracious, what a state they're in"; and I said "I don't suppose anyone has even touched them for the last hundred and fifty years." And Mrs. Thompson stopped and looked at me and said "Do you mean to tell me, Mr. Harvey, that this piece of brown paper is one hundred and fifty years old?" So I said "Yes, that's just about what it must be." And Mrs. Thompson said "My goodness me"; and she picked up the feather mop and dusted that brown-paper parcel as carefully and delicately as if it had been a piece of Dresden china.

There are morals that both historian and archivist can draw from this little anecdote. For one thing it exemplifies the popular appeal of archaeology, the study of the past through material re-

mains. It is these material remains, these pieces of brown paper, that the layman finds it easiest to understand, to relate to, to feel the thrill of contact with past ages as he sees an object that served the same function, meant the same thing to men long ago as it does to him today. One imagines the Anglo-Saxon fastening his garnet brooch, buying something with his silver penny, and one thinks "Ah, there was someone just like me" (he was not in the least in point of fact, but this does not appear from the material object). This is ultimately why the archaeologist is able to command funds on a scale to make the historian gasp. Not that I complain of this for one moment; it is wholly excellent that archaeology can find financial support and I only wish it could get far more. It is my belief that archaeologist and historian are engaged on essentially the same job of revealing and understanding the past. Archaeology is bound to be an expensive method of recovering information; but the information it recovers could otherwise not be known at all (and I am speaking of historic as well as of prehistoric periods). It needs all the help it can get, and very urgently, if much of the information, in Europe at least, is not to be lost forever under the impact of road construction, urban rebuilding, and new techniques in farming.

But the historian, no less than the archaeologist, faces continual erosion and loss of his sources of information, the written records of the past, and unlike the archaeologist he cannot look to public sympathy for support. The layman thrills at the piece of brown paper but the minutes of the Quarter Sessions clerk leave him cold, for their human interest (in fact considerable) lies concealed behind the triple barrier of a strange and apparently illegible handwriting, archaic or even foreign language, and the formal technicalities of legal proceedings. If Sellar and Yeat-

man were right, and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle really was "the first English newspaper," then the British layman would at once be able to relate to it and take in it the same interest he is prepared to show in Anglo-Saxon brooches or silver pennies. The trouble is that it is not; it is a more or less dreary account of kings and battles, written in a language that hardly anyone alive today can understand; and it is often not to be believed at face value in any case. And even when we come to the age of newspapers and letters and diaries and tax returns they still make much less impact on the layman than one might expect. Where the written word is easily comprehensible it is apt to tell us all too much: it shows all too clearly how very different people in the past were from people today in their outlook, their interests, their way of thought, so instead of arousing sympathy it alienates it. At best, our ancestors merely seem quaint. So the layman prefers to stick to the familiar piece of brown paper as his guide to the past, and the historian and archivist are left to battle alone for the documents inside.

How have they made out? In what follows I shall be referring solely to archival records. And instead of covering the whole British heritage of historic archives I shall confine myself to England: the problems in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, though very similar, are not identical and it would be tedious to have to keep pointing out the minor differences. In England, then, a hundred years ago the organization for preserving the written records of the past, though inadequate, was at least systematic and rational. Broadly speaking there was a three-pronged attack. First there were the public records, that is the archives of the Crown, of the various offices and departments of central government, from Domesday Book onwards; these were entrusted to the

Public Record Office that had been set up in 1838. Then there was the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, appointed on a temporary basis in 1869 but by successive reappointments effectively a permanent body; this kept a sort of watching brief on other historical records and on the owner's invitation it would inspect, list, and publish reports and catalogues of the archives belonging to town councils, cathedral churches, the landed gentry, and other private owners. Finally the British Museum, backed by the Bodleian Library at Oxford and one or two other libraries of national standing, was engaged on maintaining and enlarging, by gift and purchase, a national collection of historical papers: a sort of *crème de la crème* selected for permanent preservation to which it gave top de luxe treatment—letters would be bound into volumes, fully indexed in printed catalogues, and so on. It selected these highly privileged papers with good sense and imagination and with more attention than might be expected to as yet unformulated archival principles. It was all very inadequate, of course, but it was logical, and by and large this three-pronged system was not a bad way of offering minimal protection to the nation's historical records.

Much has changed since then, mostly for the better. In the first place many owners of major archives, instead of relying on the occasional good offices of the Historical Manuscripts Commission and other expert help from outside, have appointed their own archivists to give them full-time attention. All sorts of enlightened archive owners have done this: private firms, from Coutts the bankers to British Petroleum, nationalized industries like the National Coal Board, great landowners such as the Marquess of Salisbury, cathedral chapters, and city and county councils (the heirs to Quarter Sessions and other historically important organs of local

government). Along with this has come the growth of archivists as a recognized body with professional standards and qualifications; this has brought to these piecemeal developments a rigorousness and consistency in principles and methods that they would otherwise have lacked. The task of archivists employed by these archive-producing bodies is of course twofold: both the proper conservation and classification of the records of the more distant past and the organization of records still in current use with a view not only to efficient management but also to selection of those to be kept permanently—the historical records of the future. Nor have the good works stopped there. County councils and some other local authorities have not only brought professional archivists in to look after their own records; they have taken upon themselves the work of caring for any historical records in their areas whose owners wish to deposit them in the local record office, even if this deposit is only by way of long-term loan (“permanent deposit”) without transfer of legal ownership. The work of local record offices in preserving and making available historical records should not be underestimated; over the last 50 years it has infinitely expanded and enriched—in many fields quite revolutionized—historical studies in England. They provide a systematic service for identifying, preserving, and making available historical records that covers in detail the whole country.

All of which can only be applauded by anyone interested in the raw material of historical research. But other developments, often well intentioned, have been less happy. Taking first the old, established repositories, there has been a slight blurring of the formerly clear-cut and very distinct roles of the British Museum’s library departments (now British Library, Reference Division) and

the Public Record Office. On the one hand the Public Record Office has accepted gifts and deposits of private collections of papers; at a loss to slot them into its classification scheme for government archives (as it well might be), it places them, by an odd fiction, among the administrative records of the Public Record Office itself. And, on the other hand, certain classes of what are indisputably Crown archives have been transferred from the relevant government department not to the Public Record Office but to the British Library; examples are the manuscripts of plays submitted to the Lord Chamberlain for censorship from 1837 to 1968, or the preliminary drawings for the earliest Ordnance Survey maps covering the whole country on the scale of one inch to a mile. These developments suggest that both institutions have slightly lost their sense of direction; and this seems even clearer in the failure of the British Library to adjust its archive collecting policies to the situation of today instead of that of a century ago. Deeds and estate papers of primarily local significance it now leaves to the local record offices; otherwise its practice is quite unchanged. It acquires (in full ownership only, not on deposit), not always with that regard for archival principles that obtains elsewhere, collections of papers to which it still gives the elitist treatment of binding in volumes and full indexing in printed catalogues—all fully justifiable when this was the national collection of all the historical papers likely to be permanently preserved, but not justifiable at all now that it is only one of many repositories where archives are kept for posterity, many of them of no less importance than those in the British Library. Ten years on the staff of its Department of Manuscripts left me as bewildered as I was before on the rationale of its policy towards archival material; I can see it only as a

strangely surviving relic of the national system for preserving historic records that existed in Victorian England.

But this is only one of many anomalies. Far worse is the proliferation of repositories alongside and even in competition with the system of local record offices established by cities and county councils. I do not have in mind here the all too few cases where an archive of outstanding importance is preserved in professional care in the buildings where it was accumulated, the setting where it really belongs. This is what we should all regard as the ideal. It is something that has been achieved at Durham, where the university's Department of Palaeography and Diplomatic provides qualified archivists to look after the records of the Dean and Chapter (and of their medieval predecessor, the Cathedral Priory) in Durham Cathedral. But it is by no means every English university that is so enlightened or that recognizes that archives are the concern of archivists and that archive repositories and libraries are two very different things. Far too often there has been misplaced zeal by (I am sorry to say) professors of history who have been happily ignorant of Jenkinson's dictum and of the carefully worked out philosophy of archive management that lies behind it and who have conspired to bring into university libraries archives that should never be there, often for some short-term scholarly project or, indeed, simply to serve as a source of research projects for a few postgraduate pupils. When this potential has been exhausted the archives are apt to be left—like stranded whales, as an archivist friend recently put it to me—and like stranded whales they run the grave risk of being cut up into little pieces and vanishing for ever. Even worse, because it results from conscious planning and often considerable expenditure, is the collection of archives on

thematic lines that is undertaken by certain academic and professional institutions. This practice necessarily breaks a fundamental principle of archive management: that archives should be kept not with a particular type of use or user in mind but with a view to providing information for the widest possible range of inquiries, many of them wholly unforeseeable. That other equally basic principles have not been frequently breached as well has been due largely to the professionalism of the archivists entrusted with the workings of these schemes. I disagree with the philosophy that has led the University of Reading's Institute of Agricultural History to collect agricultural records, or the Royal Institute of British Architects to collect architects' papers, but I would be the first to agree that the detailed management of both these projects is admirable. What is so deplorable is the need that has brought them into being. And this brings me straight to what I think is most seriously wrong with the present position in archive preservation in England and in particular to the appalling gaps in the system.

Quite simply, far too much slips through the net. The various professional and thematic repositories, however sensibly and liberally their guardians interpret their role, are strictly limited in the type of material they preserve. And whereas in theory local-government repositories provide coverage for the whole country, in practice they do not. The system works well enough in mainly rural areas, where local archivists manage to keep tabs particularly on what one might call the more traditional types of private archives—deeds and papers in country houses and solicitors' offices, parish records, the archives of small businesses, and so on—though even here they seldom have the resources to adopt any

but a rather hit-and-miss policy of aggressively hunting for archives before their owners start wondering how to dispose of them. In urban areas the position is even less satisfactory: no metropolitan authority maintains a record office on anything remotely like the scale needed to monitor the area's potential producers of historical records. And in London, despite outstanding work by the record offices of city and county, as well as by other organizations, the situation is all too clearly entirely out of control: the extraordinary concentration there of institutions, businesses, and individuals whose records are of historical value calls for massive effort and resources to provide the oversight and the publicity and propaganda that are needed. In my view far too little is kept; the daily loss of records of value to the future historian is at least as serious as the daily loss of archaeological evidence of which one tends to hear very much more. And if I had to identify the type of record the loss of which is the most serious, the records that slip most easily through the all too imperfect net that archivists and historians have set, I would describe them as records of second-class national importance: records of institutions and individuals without strong local connections who have occupied a significant place in the national life without being at the very centre of the stage: industrialists; administrators at home and abroad; the less prominent Members of Parliament; national societies; those writers, composers, and artists whose names are not quite household words; and the smaller London-based firms. The list is endless. It is not just that their records are especially at risk; in practice it is no one's business to see that they are ever kept, and short of strenuous (and most exceptional) efforts on the part of their owners it is quite certain that they never will be. Yet not only the bulk but

the potential historical value of records of this sort is enormous.

"But," the layman will at once say, "we can't possibly keep vast quantities of paper—there simply isn't the space." In fact we could keep very many times as many historic records as we do now without running the smallest risk of creating an ecological problem. No one worries about the amount of space taken up by a suburban church, an entertainments hall, or a barn, yet the cubic capacity of any one of these may well be greater than the total space devoted to preserving historical records in many English counties today. Moreover this is a prime example of the brown-paper syndrome, for one never hears the same comment about museums. Yet on one single museum site, the 200 acres of the North of England Open Air Museum at Beamish, near Newcastle upon Tyne, one could probably house every scrap of unpublished writing more than 100 years old surviving from the whole of Europe. Moreover the problem is likely to be a finite one. After all, in Britain the Elementary Education Act of 1870 had no sooner brought within everyone's grasp the ability to write (and hence to contribute to archives) than the invention of the telephone started to make this ability unnecessary. Folklore—perhaps even history—tells that W. E. Gladstone, among other strange habits, used to write home from his office to his wife several times every day; nowadays the Prime Minister, if similarly inclined, does not write notes to her husband but presumably calls him on some sort of hot line. That is why, contrary to popular belief, handwriting reached its lowest ebb some three generations ago, as men of affairs spent their time frantically scribbling notes to one another simply because this was the only way they could communicate. The role of the written word has changed significantly over the last century; over the next cen-

tury it is likely to change even more, and the archivist in 100 years' time will probably be particularly concerned with machine-readable records, a form of archive which presents problems of its own but which will solve many of the problems of space, conservation, and arrangement that beset archivists today. It is my guess that when that time comes the biggest problem will be that more was not kept from the age of the written word and that there will be many regrets among historians and others—unless, that is, there is very soon a radical change in archive-keeping practices.

But whether or not this occurs there is a crying need in Britain for a generally accepted national archives policy. By this I do not mean a centrally directed and rigorously controlled system of local repositories, such as is found in France (though this arrangement has its merits). Nor do I envisage any kind of directives on what should or should not be preserved: there is much to be said for a system that permits survival of records by more or less haphazard selection or even by accident. What I do envisage is guidelines offered so that everyone engaged in the business of preserving historical records in Britain knows how his work fits into the overall national picture—what he is doing and why, so to speak—and so that there are no gaps. At present all is anarchy and chaos; and without the good sense of professional archivists and their collaboration across the institutional frontiers, this would be even more clearly apparent. What is needed is a return to the logic or rationale of 100 years ago; it is all the more necessary now that there is so much more activity.

What is to be the source of this guidance? What fount of wisdom can be

drawn on? The answer is probably not to be found among existing organizations, though some possible candidates come to mind. But the British Library cultivates its own garden and so does the Public Record Office. The Society of Archivists is primarily a professional association, the British Records Association no more than a private society of actively concerned well-wishers. The Historical Manuscripts Commission? More than any other body it has of recent years offered informal guidance and arbitration where difficulties have arisen. In 1980 a government review of the Commission and its work was undertaken by D. Caplan, who was appointed on 7 January and reported less than three months later, on 3 April. He interpreted his brief as extending to a general survey of the whole field of the preservation of historical records throughout the United Kingdom, and given its length, coverage, and detail it was an astonishing achievement to have produced such a report with such speed. Given the speed with which it was prepared it is not surprising that many of those with most knowledge of the Commission and its work have considered some of his conclusions hasty and his detailed recommendations unconvincing. It will be a thousand pities if the criticisms of the report lead to the casting into oblivion of one of its key recommendations: the need for a new national archives policy. The need is glaring—though whether it could effectively be met by the means suggested in the report is questionable.

Attached to the Caplan Report, as issued by the Civil Service Department,¹ is a comment by the Historical Manuscripts Commission itself. Referring to the report's advocacy of a national archives policy and, in particular, to

¹*Independent Review of the Work of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts: Report by Mr. D. Caplan, April 1980* (copies available from the Civil Service Department Library, Whitehall, London SW1A 2AZ, England).

Caplan's recommendations for putting one into effect, the Commission comments:

To effect the changes suggested, Draconian legislation would be necessary, involving interference with existing rights of private property as well as substantial additional public expenditure. Even if the latter could be provided, the Commissioners would continue to regard the former as unlikely to command general public support.

Here, however regrettably, I think the Commissioners are undeniably correct. Nowhere is the brown-paper syndrome more evident than when we look at the legislation that protects Britain's heritage from the past, the heritage both material and documentary. Laws protecting historical records are concerned only with a very few types of record of possible legal value. Under rules laid down by the Master of the Rolls, manorial documents are required to be preserved, changes of ownership notified, and, in certain circumstances, lists produced. There are some restrictions on what can be done with tithe redemption documents. Under successive Church Measures bishops may require parish registers to be deposited in the diocesan record office. And, as far as historical records are concerned, that is the lot. There are export regulations, and the Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art does its best to see that their spirit is observed; but in practice anyone can export any historical document provided he is prepared to pay a price that no British repository can match—not, in fact, particularly difficult to do. It is all pretty pathetic. And we can in fact be sure that if legislation were proposed requiring all owners of unpublished writings more than a century old to deposit them in a record office, "unlikely to command general public support" would be quite an understatement. Yet such a law

would cause the owners of these records no expense whatever and almost no inconvenience.

Turning then to legislation to protect Britain's material remains from the past, what do we find? All over the country there are innumerable ancient monuments, historic houses, scheduled buildings of one sort or another, whose owners are in varying degrees forbidden, in the public interest, to demolish or even to alter them—a prohibition which imposes on them great inconvenience and often very substantial financial burdens. For Draconian legislation, involving wholesale interference with the rights of private property, one could hardly do better. Moreover, and most dangerously, this is one of the few areas where care for the brown paper could actually imperil the historical documents wrapped up in it. For the expenses involved in the upkeep of antiquated buildings may well lead their owners to sell their family papers for what they can get on the open market—to sell and to disperse them, and dispersal means, effectively, their loss to scholarship. Recently there have been ominous signs that this has begun to happen. Yet, as I say, the chances of legislation that would protect the archives as well as the house are, in the present climate of opinion, minimal.

Is there anything to be done about all this? In the first place there is much missionary work to be done among British historians. The archivist ought not to be a historian, but there is no reason why every historian should not be an archivist, at least to the point of taking a fully informed interest in the way the raw material for his work is, or ought to be, salvaged for his use. Historians are often up in arms, understandably and rightly, over any threat to the availability of records, but they seem apt to take for granted all other aspects of archive management. The British Records

Association, a society of those interested in record preservation, has very few members who are solely users of records, who have never at any time been concerned with records as custodians, as archivists. It is not just that hardly any professional historians have heard of Jenkinson's dictum with which I began this article; very few are aware of even the most elementary principles of archive practice that lie behind it. The archaeologist quarries his own raw material. Whether or not the historian does the same he should at least know how it is done, so as to avoid some of the more ham-fisted attempts to help that have caused not a few of the problems on the present archival scene.

But in addition there is an urgent need to educate the British public in the value of the written word to our knowledge and understanding of the past: the value

of the Quarter Sessions minutes, or the potential value, even more important, of the letters and papers that they have in home or office. Here we can usefully take a leaf out of the archaeologists' book. They started with the great advantage of immediate public sympathy and interest—the interest that the piece of brown paper will arouse. But they have built on this to popularize some degree of real understanding of archaeology and its problems, and if they had not done so the funds that enable them to exercise their craft would never have been forthcoming. Archivists and historians too can build on the piece of brown paper, for it is an archival as well as an archaeological object. It is up to us to coax the layman into unwrapping the parcel; you never know—he may someday even show some interest in the records it contains.