

The historian and the archivist: two professions separated by a common language?

ESH 2nd years

Introduction

In the initial stages of the preparation of your dissertations, you will need to consider what sources you can effectively use and where they are located. The purpose of this seminar is to provide you generally with a background to the nature of archives and record offices so that you know what to expect. At one level -- a more intellectual one -- it will attempt to describe to you the approach of the archivist so that you will be able to relate to archivists and record offices more effectively and thus derive optimum benefits for your research. Archivists are not simply historians who look after historical records; they have their own professional principles and culture which influences how they relate to historians and historical research.

Archival principles and historical practice

The implications are these. Archives are records which were classically produced as part of an administrative or organisational process. In that process, they were produced unselfconsciously, without any regard to historical usage in the future. They were produced unselfconsciously and unreflectively. They were not produced with an eye for future historical research. That being so, the primary principle of archival organisation or arrangement is to respect the *fonds originel* – that is, the archivist must respect the original structure in which the records were arranged by the administration because it reflects the purposes for which the administration produced those records. The first principle of the archivist then is to preserve the original arrangement of the papers. So the *dicta* of Jenkinson were that archives are the natural remnants of an administrative organisation which unselfconsciously produced records for its own purposes without any regard to historians' requirements and that consequently the first responsibility of the archivist is to respect and retain that organisation. What is of primary importance in archival arrangement of the records is the original administrative process and how the records reflect that process. It must be said that Jenkinson's principles evolved out of the practice of his own organisation: the Public Record Office. It was thus contingent to some extent on very particular circumstances. The Public Record Office received the records which government departments no longer needed for administrative purposes – that is, which were no longer current or even semi-current. The objective of the Public

arrangement of the records and to preserve that arrangement when the records arrive in the record office.

The second implication from Jenkinson's *dictum* is that the archivist is to some extent non-interventionist. Happily, that position has changed. Until the 1960s, however, it was effectively true that what archivists did was passively to receive from various organisations those records that remained and that were no longer needed by the organisation. The consequence was the loss of masses of records. That is to some extent now an historical problem. The importance for you is that not all the records that you would like to have survived, will have survived. The situation has changed in this way: archivists are much more active in endeavouring to ensure the survival of records. They manage this in two ways. The first, most interventionist way is with their own organisations, through modern records managements, actively being involved in the management of records from currency through semi-currency to non-currency. By their own organisation I mean the following. Archives and record offices based in local authorities (i.e. county record offices and district record offices or archives) are involved in the management of the records of their own authority. Some businesses, for example, also have their own archivists and those archivists are involved in the management of the organisation's records from currency through non-currency to archives. So modern records management techniques have changed the face of some aspect of the detritus

authorities, but have a wider brief to receive records from many other local organisations, for example businesses which do not have their own archives, estate accumulations, charities etc. Again, we'll come back to the structure of archives and where records are located. The point here is that local authority record offices take records from other organisations as well as their own. Their interventionist role is to survey records in the locality. So, for example, the local record office will be constantly surveying records in private hands, not deposited in the record office, with a view to encouraging the deposit of those records, but also to establish what exists and with a long-term view to the preservation of those records even if the owner is not prepared to place them in the record office now.

Let us now return to Jenkinson's idea of the *fonds originel*. The archivist preserves the original arrangement of the records as it reflects the objectives and organisation of the administration which produced them. That has profound implications for you as the historian, because the records are not arranged in a manner which easily allows you access to discrete pieces of information. If you are interested in the administrative organisation, that's excellent, but if you want to mine the records for information, you have problems because there is no easy pathway through for you. Bear in mind, however, that even for you, it is important to understand how the organisation functioned and the context in which the records were originally produced, so that original

list is usually bound or placed in a ring binder. So too the accession of records of the Hallamshire Cooperative Society will be described in a discrete and separate list. So each record accumulation has a separate list. That form of separate listing for each record accumulation thus accords with the principle of the sanctity of the archival group – or the *fonds originel*. The detail of the list can vary, sometimes depending on how far the description has progressed. The highest form of description is the descriptive list but many accumulations will have only summary lists. Now archivists talk about classes of record – that is records of one type such as minute books – and pieces. The class is all minute books, but the piece would be, for example, an individual minute book. In summary listings, the description of the piece – the particular minute book – might be merely:

Minute book of directors' meetings, August 1929-January 1933.

A higher form of description is quite often reserved for records which are more complex because of their structure, handwriting (palaeography) or language. For example, 13th-century charters will be provided with more detailed description – the calendar, which is an abstract in English of the salient details of the charter or title deed: who are the parties; what is the date; what is the property; and what is the consideration (e.g. purchase price)?

are cut through the whole accumulations of records by indexes. Thus the pieces in each record accumulation are indexed and placed into general indices: persons; places; and subjects. The indices cut a pathway through all the records deposited in the archives.

Now, here are some words of caution. In recent years, there have been attempts to standardise archival description for the purposes of computerisation. Nevertheless, the standard of the finding aids – from lists to indices – will vary from record office to record office, for two reasons. Funding of record offices varies enormously from one local authority to another. That is fundamental to the kind of facility you will find. Local government funding from central government is divided into two categories: prescribed funding (special funding dedicated to police, fire etc) and miscellaneous funding which is delivered for the rest of the services. Archives offices have had to compete for funding with much larger services in the local authority with different degrees of success.

Historically, some record offices have had such financial problems that even their finding aids have remained in a poor state. The quality of the finding aids will therefore vary from one record office to another. At the apex, the Essex Record Office has all its finding aids on-line. Users there do not use paper finding aids, but use the bank of 50 PCs in the record office to interrogate the lists and order material. Indeed, the Essex Record Office finding aids (SEAX) are accessible through the World-Wide Web. Other record offices

through web access, but that will be demonstrated to you in another session. Basically, the NRA receives a copy of a list of a record accumulation as it is produced from each record office. The NRA then retains a copy of the list, but also indexes it according to NRA rules (i.e. it is a very restricted and not extended manner of indexing). The point to note, on which many archivists comment, is that when you consult the NRA indexes, the reference number which you acquire is simply the reference number for the NRA's own purposes. It does not relate in any way to the record office's own reference or call-number.

Over the years, a number of record offices – but not all -- have published printed guides which are an overall prospectus of the records held in the record office. Kent and Lancashire are good examples. Even in this electronic age, it is still worth examining the published guide to a record office in which you are interested for an overall perspective of the records held there. Of course, the problem of the guides is whether there have been subsequent editions or revisions. In particular, this is a problem for business records which have tended to be deposited in volume (quantity) only in more recent years. Some record offices have also produced specialised guides to particular classes of records – such as business records. Sheffield Archives is a case in point and, if you are interested in business records in Sheffield, your first recourse might be the guide to business records

records.

First, there is no guarantee that the records which you want will be in a record office. Apart from the records of some organisations, records are privately owned. Although owners are encouraged to deposit records in record offices, they are not legally obliged to do so. Concomitantly, when they do place records in a record office, the original owners do not relinquish ownership of those records. They retain ownership. The record office is simply the custodian. The owner can withdraw the records. This arrangement is known in law as a gratuitous bailment, but generally in the archive world as 'legal deposit'. In recent years, record offices have tried to negotiate deposit agreements with owners so that there is some guarantee that the records will remain in the record office for a reasonable period of time.

If owners do deposit records, they may place restrictions of access to them. As part of the negotiations for deposit, owners might ask for closure of papers relating to particular subjects or they might impose a blanket time-period of closure. The period of closure is entirely at the owners' discretion. It is not unusual for owners of estate papers – such as the Duke of Norfolk – to insist on closure for 100 years. There is nothing that the archivist can do about this because of the necessity of getting the records into a safe

years. One hundred years used to be the statutory closure period for public records which contain personal details about individuals – what the PRO has called particular instance records. From the 1970s, the length of closure on such records was reduced to 75 years for new classes of record which were coming into the public domain, such as adoption records. It is likely that new closure periods specified in future for PIRs will be 75 years, but this will not be retrospective to records where 100 years has already been specified.

There is a general predilection to select 30 years as a generic closure period for records which are not PIRs. Obviously, this period replicates the 30 years established by the Public Records Act of 1967 which revised downwards the 50 years in the 1958 Public Records Act. You may well find, therefore, there is a sort of widespread application of this rule.

Nevertheless, there are statutory rights to inspect certain types of record. For example, the minutes of local authorities are open to inspection and, where it is necessary for the comprehension of the minutes, the supporting papers as well. The position is rarely so clear, however, and other complications occur. One of these, which exercised archivists mightily in the 1970s, was the implication of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act (1974). What intention did that Act have for archivists producing the records of Quarter Sessions and Magistrates Courts and of the post-1972 Crown Courts? These are all Public Records as defined by the 1958 Act and yet access to them was, it seemed in

record subsists in the author of the work (or, in the cases of organisations, the employer who can be construed to have commissioned it). Under the 1958 Act, copies for private study could be made if the author died more than 50 years ago and the 'work' was more than 100 years old. Note here that it could be copied, but only for private study. It is thus axiomatic that if the archive is less than 100 years old and the author died less than 50 years ago, the record office could not provide a photocopy. Endless problems were encountered because of this problem. Many historians simply did not understand the meaning of the Act. Nor did they understand that if it had not been published, technically they had to seek copyright permission to publish the record if they intended to publish it verbatim. Remember here that copyright subsists in the form of words, not the ideas. You can legally paraphrase it, but not replicate the form of words. So those historians should have first sought the permission of the copyright owners, including literary executors where appropriate, and, if that proved impossible, have given notice three times that they intended to publish and invite the copyright owners to declare. If the owners did not declare, then the historian could proceed to publish. Endless contention was caused by this restriction. The 1988 Copyright Act amended the situation to remove the 100 years old clause, but retained the 50 years after the death of the author. It is still mightily difficult to know if the author of a letter died more than 50 years ago and who is the current owner of the copyright in that work, the letter. Bear in mind that ownership of the

literary executors or heirs can provide it. Even worse, however, in line with European regulations, the period after death is being revised upwards to 75 years. I remember one particularly contentious case where an historian would not accept that we could not photocopy wages books less than 100 years old from private collieries subsumed in the National Coal Board without permission from the NCB. So copyright is still a potential problem preventing the photocopying of recent records.

Another potential problem about reprographics is the nature of the material. Record offices will not make photocopies from bound volumes. They may offer you microfilm, jacketed film or microfiche, but some may not even be able to provide that service. There is also the possible frustration that they may not be able to copy material because it is too fragile or because it has not yet been to conservation. Indeed, they might not even be able to produce it for you to examine for those reasons. Remember that in these situations, archivists are walking a fine line between user-friendliness and supporting historical research and ensuring the preservation of material for use by future generations of historians. They are not simply placing obstacles in your way.

Selection/retention/disposal

of Towns Act, which was permissive, and the 1858 Local Government Act. All new buildings had to conform to building byelaws so that a plan had to be deposited for the building and the entry in the building byelaws register included details of the owner, the architect, the type of property and the date of completion. The combination of the deposited plans, the registers, the large scale 500 OS maps, and the census, made it possible to recover the development of the built urban form. In 1972, a complete and comprehensive run of these plans was deposited in Leicester City Archives. That can be compared with Sheffield, where, before these records were deposited in 1975, the City Council had embarked on its own unilateral action of systematic purposive sampling and microfilming without external consultation. So tragedies have occurred in the past before archivists have been able to intervene.

That prospect is now less likely, at least in local authorities, where modern records management means that the archivist actively intervenes in the management of records from currency through semi-currency to non-currency. At the end of this process, when the records become non-current for organisational purposes, it is the archivist who appraises the records for selection and retention or disposal, by whatever method necessary, including sampling. The survival of records is thus actively managed.

There is an obverse side to this coin which is that there are legal prescriptions for the retention of certain classes of record. To take an example outside the records of

The structure of archives

A rough division of archives offices might recognise a division between local authority record offices and what are designated ‘specialist repositories’. The local authority record offices are a core structure of archives so they shall be considered first. Local authority record offices had little official authorisation before 1962. The 1962 Local Government (Records) Act regularised the organisation of county record offices and some county borough record offices, providing a comprehensive structure of record offices throughout the country. Before 1962, local authority record offices had developed in a sporadic and piecemeal manner. The origins of some extend back to the 1920s: Bedfordshire under the inspiration of H G Fowler or Northamptonshire under that of Joan Wake. Others were established before the Second World War, such as Essex in 1938. Usually, the impetus was the recognition of the need to do something about the historical records of Quarter Sessions, the county administration before the formation of county councils in 1889 under the 1888 Local Government Act. From that core responsibility, these early record offices then offered their services for the preservation of records in private ownership. Nevertheless, some counties did not provide a county record office until required to do so under the Local Government (Records) Act of 1962 – an example is Derbyshire. The

in particular to take custody of the records of historical Quarter Sessions, through the system of deposit (gratuitous bailment), local authority record offices have developed as *comprehensive* record offices, by which is meant that they have acquisitions of records from all sorts of provenance. There is a comparison here with the ‘specialist repositories’. Some specialist repositories have custody only of the records of their own organisations – for example, archives in businesses. The archive is concerned only with the records of its parent organisation. Other specialist repositories, particularly those in Universities – for example, Nottingham University Dept of Manuscripts – receive records from a wider range of provenance and also operate a legal deposit system. Even so, this small number of specialist repositories with wider record accumulations does still not have the breadth and range of record accumulations that local authority record offices have.

We have then, two basic strands of record offices: local authority record offices which receive records from a variety of provenance within the locality; and specialist repositories which operate at several different levels, from concern only with the records of the parent organisation (perhaps a business) to acquisition of record accumulations from a wider range of organisations but without the breadth of local authority record offices.

- Public Records. These are Public Records which are deposited in local record offices under the 1958 and 1967 Public Records Acts. They comprise such records as those of Quarter Sessions, Magistrates Courts and the successor Crown Courts, Hospital records, National Coal Board records, British Rail records, etc. In the cases of ‘nationalised industries’, not all the records will be in a local record office. What happens is that the industry will have had its own records management organisations which would be the initial point of management of the records. For example, the South Yorkshire region of the NCB had a repository at the former Pithead Baths at Denby and the Midlands region of the NCB had its records store at Cole Orton House in Leicestershire. There was also a national records management store for the NCB at Berry Hill in Mansfield. The regional repository transferred records directly to the local record office. The national records centre at Berry Hill, however, was visited first by a records manager from the Public Record Office who directed which records should be transferred to the PRO. Other, more local records were then passed to the local record offices. Similarly, the records of British Rail and its predecessors are split between the PRO (class RAIL) and local

E parishes: registers of baptisms, marriages and burials; minutes of the Parochial Church Council; tithe awards; etc. The second level is as the place of deposit for records of C of E Diocesan Registries and of the Diocesan Board of Finance. The Diocesan Registry is the secretariat of the diocese. From this source derive court books of ecclesiastical courts and the administrative records of the diocese such as glebe terriers etc.

Additionally certain records were returned to local record offices which acted for diocesan records by the Church Commission, including, for example, probate records such as wills and probate inventories.

- Records from various provenance such as businesses, charities, local societies and organisations, landed estates, etc.

The experience of the local record office

Your experience of the record office will be influenced by one important consideration: that archives are unique and cannot be replaced. Not only that, but, as mentioned above, most of the archives in record offices do not belong to the local authority but are privately owned. The vast proportion of archives are placed on legal deposit – the gratuitous bailment – by which the archives office must exercise a duty of reasonable care for the safety of the documents towards the owners. There is only one

The experience is different from working in a library.

In recent years, since the mid 1980s, admission to record offices has been controlled and regularised to improve security. To be admitted to a record office now, you will be required to produce some form of official identification and be issued with a user ticket which you will need to produce on each visit. You will be required to sign into a register each time you visit. Many county records offices belong to a scheme, the County Archives Research Network (CARN). Those offices which belong to this scheme have a standard for security and issue a ticket which is valid at all record offices which belong to the scheme. For example, my CARN user ticket issued at Essex Record Office is valid at Hampshire Record Office or Leicestershire Record Office which also belong to CARN. Nevertheless, some record offices – like Northamptonshire – do not belong to CARN, but they still have their own elaborate security procedures. At CARN record offices, you will need to produce your ticket to get admission and you will need to produce it to leave the office. At all CARN record offices – and some others – the door to the searchroom (the user area) is locked and operated from a central control point. You will only be allowed to enter and leave the searchroom area by the archivists or archives assistants releasing the automatic lock on the door.

When documents are produced for you, you will have to submit your user ticket and it will only be returned to you when you have returned the documents and they have

research, but also to ensure the integrity and security of those documents.

In being issued with a ticket and with documents, you are implicitly agreeing to observe the searchroom regulations which will be on the desk that you are using in the searchroom. The cardinal rules are that you must use pencil and must not do anything to prejudice the condition of the document. You will probably be given some advice on how to handle the document and perhaps given some aids – rests, weights or snakes – to handle the document without damage.

The experience of using a record office is thus different. It might initially be daunting. This talk is intended to explain why that experience might seem to be daunting, elucidating the reasons for the environment that you will experience. It is daunting, but it is also an enriching experience and archivists and archives assistants are kind and helpful and have an enormous fund of knowledge about the archives in their care and custody.

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