THE BRITISH RECORD SOCIETY
—EIGHTY YEARS OF AN INDEX

Peter Spufford

It was really in the autumn of 1887 that the British Record Society began. It was the first of several societies to be founded by William Phillimore, a distant relation of the famous legal family. He was then a young London solicitor, recently down from Oxford and the influence of Stubbs. With his friend Walford Selby, of the Public Record Office, he lamented the lack of printed indexes to the public records. The publications of the Record Commissioners had come to an end some fifty years earlier, and all that was being published officially were the Calendars of State Papers. Apart from these, no indexes or calendars were being printed. The Rolls Series, the Camden Society and the then recently formed Pipe Roll Society were all concerned with printing a limited number of select documents in full. Phillimore did not intend to start yet another society. Instead, with Selby’s moral support, and the financial backing of Charles Clark, the legal publisher, he embarked upon a private scheme for the publication of a ‘series of indexes to the principal English Records’, which he grandly entitled the Index Library.

He began by issuing monthly instalments of several indexes at once to interest the maximum number of people. His first instalment, dated January 1888, and issued in the middle of the previous December, consisted of the first sixteen pages of a calendar of Chancery Proceedings of the reign of Charles I, sixteen pages of an index to late sixteenth and early seventeenth century Bills of Privy Signet, and sixteen pages of the index nominum to the Royalist Composition Papers of the Commonwealth Period. All these were transcriptions of manuscript indexes already existing in the Public Record Office, and Phillimore did not at first see any point in producing fresh indexes of his own. ‘The aim of the Editor,’ he wrote in December 1887, ‘is not so much to compile new Indexes and Calendars to the Records, as to render available old ones now in manuscript, which have stood the test of long use.’ He was soon compelled to write, however, of one of his sources: ‘These indexes, unfortunately, have been done very badly, and the only thing which can be said in their favour is, that a bad index is, perhaps, better than none at all. They were evidently compiled by persons unable to read the handwriting of the Stuart period, and unacquainted with even the elements of indexing.’ In consequence the work was more complex than he anticipated, as he began to check the existing indexes and correct their inadequacies. Soon he was involved in the much slower task of compiling rather than copying indexes. Nevertheless he persisted for two years in issuing forty-eight pages of index every month to anybody who was prepared to buy them. He sold his monthly parts at two shillings each or a guinea a year for twelve instalments. As Phillimore was to write afterwards, ‘Financially it did not prove a success owing, apparently, to a fear that the serial might not continue long enough to complete the works being issued in it, and the publisher suggested that the subscribers to the Index Library should be invited to form a society’. And so, although this was hardly Phillimore’s original in-
tention, the British Record Society was brought into being in November 1889 to put the project on a more secure basis. 'The wisdom of this step was soon shown by a marked accession of new subscribers, which was clearly due to the increased stability given to the Index Library by the formation of the Society.' Phillimore became the first secretary of the Society, and remained editor of his serial publication. This now came out in larger, quarterly, instalments. The original intentions of Phillimore bore a remarkable similarity to the aims of the founders of the List and Index Society, founded in 1965, who are now once again rapidly printing copies of the existing indexes in the Public Record Office.

Phillimore soon modified his original plans in two directions, firstly towards the compilation rather than merely the copying of indexes, and secondly towards indexing material outside the Public Record Office. Indeed, the first set of parts of the Index Library to be completed and ready for binding was not one of his original Public Record Office Indexes, it was his transcription of the calendar of wills proved in the court of the archdeacon of Northampton between 1510 and 1652. Phillimore's swing of interest towards provincial records caused him to write to The Times in October 1889 advocating that something should be done about their preservation, under the supervision of travelling record-inspectors sent out from the Public Record Office. 'In every county town,' he wrote, 'there should be provided a suitable building under the direction of the county council to be styled "The County Record Office".'

In May 1890 the young British Record Society took in the older 'Index Society', which had been founded in 1878 by Henry Wheatley, the bibliographer and topographer of London, who had been the first secretary of the 'Early English Text Society'. The 'Index Society' was in financial difficulties. At its last meeting, Wheatley, as its 'Director', proposed the merging of his society in the British Record Society on condition that the latter should discharge the printer's bill for the second and third volumes of the Index of the biographical and obituary notices in the Gentleman's Magazine 1731-1780, which the Index Society was unable to meet. In return the British Record Society received an influx of new members, and a number of new council members such as Wheatley himself and Sir Leslie Stephen, the editor of the Dictionary of national biography. In addition it took over the remaining stock of the extraordinarily wide variety of indexes published by the Index Society. The eighteen volumes which followed Wheatley's What is an index? ranged from an Index to Trevelyan's Life of Macaulay to an index of Engravings in the proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries, from the Literature of vegetable technology to the Bibliography and chronology of Hales Owen. Apart from the three-volume index to the Gentleman's Magazine, which broke the Index Society financially, the most ambitious of its productions was the Students' guide to the literature of botany (1881) by B. Daydon Jackson, of the Linnean Society, which was still thought to be worth reprinting in 1964.

Although the British Record Society had some three hundred members after the incorporation of the members of the Index Society it was not immune from financial troubles, and the bankruptcy of its printer in 1892 brought about a crisis. As a consequence the society was transformed in December of that year into a limited company and Phillimore subsequently resigned as editor and secretary in January 1893. Phillimore remained a member of the council of the society until his death in 1913, but his interests moved on and had remarkable results elsewhere. In 1896 he founded the Scottish Record Society on the basis of his Scottish Record Series. In 1897 he founded the Thoroton Society as an historical society to serve his native Nottinghamshire. In 1904 he founded the Canterbury and York Society for the publication of mediaeval episcopal registers and edited its first volume, the register of Hugh of Wells, Bishop of Lincoln 1209-1235. Attempts to found record societies for Gloucestershire and Bristol, Derbyshire and Ireland came to nothing,
but his private enterprise in publishing extracts of marriages from parish registers proved a success and he edited some two hundred volumes of these before he died.

When the guiding hand of Phillimore was removed and the society was incorporated, an additional object was added to its declared aims, 'To take any measures necessary or desirable for the protection or preservation and custody of any records or documents in the nature of records'. At the time nothing was undertaken in this direction. In 1928, however, due to the initiative of Miss Ethel Stokes and Miss Joan Wake, the society began to take up the work of record preservation seriously. This had become urgently necessary, because, since the Law of Property Act of 1924, the preservation of manorial records was no longer a legal necessity and many such documents were in danger of destruction. The Public Record Office had set up a Manorial Documents Committee in 1925, and the Manorial Society had already been engaged in listing collections of manorial documents since 1906. Certain County Record Offices had already been founded, and the Master of the Rolls had designated these and a number of other repositories as proper places for the custody of manorial records. Miss Stokes and Miss Wake felt, however, that not enough was being done to see that such records reached the right places. In 1928 the British Record Society began to give advice on where such documents should be deposited. In 1929 the Manorial Society was merged in the British Record Society, and the enlarged society hired premises for sorting documents and sending them to record offices. In 1930, no less than 30,000 documents were sorted and sent to depositories in twenty-eight different counties. In 1930, 1931 and 1932 the society held a series of three annual Congresses of Record and Allied Societies concerned with the work of preservation of historical records. As a consequence of the last of these congresses, the British Records Association was formed to take over the record preservation activities of the British Record Society, which handed over to it on 1st January, 1933, the premises that it had rented for sorting documents.

After this five-year interlude the British Record Society became once again what it had really always been, a society exclusively devoted to the compilation and publication of indexes to historical records. The necessity for a private society to continue publishing indexes to the records in the Public Record Office was removed almost at the beginning of its existence. A change in official policy in 1890 resulted in the official series of calendars of patent and close rolls which began in 1891 and 1892 and the official series of Lists and Indexes which began in 1892. In a sense Phillimore's private initiative had provoked an official action which, with the resources of the state at its disposal, could be infinitely more effective than anything done from the private sphere. Phillimore's initiative in printing the calendar of Northampton and Rutland wills was to show the way in which the society was to develop, for the probate registries, unlike the Public Record Office, were then in no position to issue their own calendars and indexes. Indeed not a single will index has yet been published by the official guardians of probate records, even by the Principal Probate Registry at Somerset House. Up to 1915, when the pace of publication slackened on account of the war, the British Record Society produced no less than forty-nine volumes in twenty-eight years, of which twenty-six were indexes to wills and administrations. Of the others, twelve were indexes to Inquisitions Post Mortem, a series which slowed down after the introduction of two official series of calendars of inquisitions post mortem in 1898 and 1904, and six were indexes to Chancery Proceedings, another series which was rendered redundant by the inclusion of indexes to Chancery Proceedings amongst the official List and Index series from 1896 onwards. Since 1915 the pace of publication has been much slower; this is because the period had come to an end when members and individuals of private means could spend lengthy periods of their own time compiling and editing indexes for the society's benefit. In the forty-eight years
since the society resumed publication in 1920
only thirty-two volumes have appeared, and
all of these, apart from four volumes of
indexes to marriage licences published be-
tween 1930 and 1940, have been indexes to
wills and administrations. It does not now
seem likely that the society will publish
indexes to records other than wills and ad-
mnistrations for some considerable time,
but such a possibility always remains open.
A return to the production of copies of
Public Record Office indexes has been pre-
empted by the formation of the List and
Index Society. The pace of production be-
fore the first world war, of one volume every
six months or so, can never be recaptured,
but there is no reason to suppose that the
subsequent average rate of two volumes in
three years should decline still further.
Indeed there are more indexes at present in
the process of compilation and publication
than at any time since the beginning of the
first world war. The quarterly issue of loose
parts of several volumes was replaced by a
half-yearly issue of parts in 1920, when
publication was resumed, and this procedure
itself did not long survive the second world
war. All volumes have been issued complete
and bound since 1947.

Before the first world war, the vast majority
of the members of the society were individ-
uals who wanted, and could then afford,
such a handy reference tool as a private set
of the volumes of the Index Library on their
own shelves. There were then only seventy
or so institutional members. Now the situa-
tion is quite reversed. The vast majority of
members are now libraries, and only a sparse
sixty individual members survive. The in-
situtional members, however, include most
of the university libraries in this country
and a large number in the United States, as
well as many of the public libraries of both
countries, apart from such specialist libraries
as those of the Institute of Historical Re-
search, the Public Record Office and num-
berous County Record Offices.

As it has grown in size, the Index Library
has grown increasingly useful, and is to-day
an invaluable tool in constant use by all
sorts of historians, both national and local,
professional and amateur, by biographers,
archivists and genealogists.

The most extensive project undertaken by
the society has been the indexing of the vast
collection of wills and administrations proved
in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury be-
fore 1700 and now kept in the Principal
Probate Registry at Somerset House. In
1965 the society produced, as its eightieth
volume, an index of wills proved in that
court between 1694 and 1700. This com-
pleted, in seventeen volumes, of which
twelve have been published by the society,
the index of Prerogative Court of Canterbury
wills from their beginning, 1383, up to 1700.
The task, which the society began in 1893,
has been an enormous undertaking, and the
volumes in this long series have been corres-
pondingly bulky. The largest runs to nearly
nine hundred pages, with fifty to sixty wills
indexed on every page. It is, of course, the
most generally useful index of any group of
English testamentary records, because the
prerogative court had over-riding probate
jurisdiction over all England and Wales, and
the sole jurisdiction where a testator had
property in two dioceses in the province of
Canterbury. Between 1653 and 1660 it was
the only probate court in England. In con-
sequence there is a high likelihood that any-
body of any prominence would have had his
will proved there. Wills are, in some ways,
the most intimate records that indivduals
leave behind them, and are neglected, at
their peril, by any historian who is at all
concerned with people.

The letters of administration granted by
the probate courts in cases of intestacy form
a supplementary series to the wills, although
they are, of course, of much less historical
value. The British Record Society is now
attempting to complete an index to the
administrations granted in the Prerogative
Court of Canterbury down to 1700 parallel
to the index of wills. The six volumes of
indexes to these administrations already pub-
lished by the society, together with the three
volumes published privately by Glencross
and Morrison, cover the years 1559-1608,
1620-30 and 1649-60. The process of filling
the gaps is well under way. Volume 83 of
the *Index Library* will cover the years 1609-19. It is being published with assistance from the British Academy, and is at present in page proof. An index for the years 1631-48 has nearly been completed, and, when this is published, there will be a continuous series of indexes up to 1660.

The third principal group of testamentary records of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury are the probate inventories which list the possessions of the deceased. They were made when their executors or heirs applied for probate of their wills and administration of their property. Social and economic historians have been clamouring for access to these inventories for some years, but they remain inaccessible until arranged and indexed. They were transferred in 1964 from Somerset House to the Public Record Office. In consequence, the British Record Society does not need to index them since indexes are being compiled in the course of their arrangement, itself a lengthy process. It is to be hoped that these indexes may eventually be published.

Apart from the wills proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury the largest group of wills in the country is, of course, that relating to London. These are divided into two major divisions, those proved in the court of the commissary of the bishop of London, and those proved in the court of the archdeacon of London. These are all now in Guildhall Library. With the aid of a generous grant from the Corporation of London an index has already been compiled to the wills proved in the commissary court, and a considerable start has been made on the wills proved in the archdeaconry court. The four-volume index to the commissary court wills, from 1374-1700, is being published jointly by the British Record Society and the Historical Manuscripts Commission. The first part of this index, which covers the period from 1374 to 1488, is due to be published in 1968 as Volume 82 of the *Index Library*.

Outside London the society has recently compiled a third, and final, volume to its index to the wills of various Essex and East Hertfordshire courts now at the Essex Record Office at Chelmsford. This is now in galley proof and will appear as Volume 84 of the *Index Library*. Volumes 78 and 79 covered the period from 1400 to 1720 and the present volume will bring the index up to 1858 when the probate jurisdiction of these courts was brought to an end.

Past volumes have included indexes to wills and administrations from Berkshire, Cornwall, Derbyshire, Devon, Dorset, Gloucestershire, Huntingdonshire, Kent, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Norfolk, Nottinghamshire, Rutland, Shropshire, Somerset, Staffordshire, Sussex, Warwickshire and Worcestershire.

At present an index of Oxfordshire Wills, 1520-1740, is in the course of being edited, and will probably be published in three volumes. Indexing is in progress, or under serious consideration, of wills in Bedfordshire, Wiltshire, and Suffolk and of further wills from Sussex. It will be noticed that neither the volumes published in the past, nor those contemplated for the future, cover wills proved in the province of York. This is because of the series of will indexes published by local societies in the north such as the Lancashire and Cheshire Record Society or the Yorkshire Archaeological Society in its Record Series. The easiest way to discover what will indexes have been published and by whom, up to 1962, is to consult Anthony J. Camp, *Wills and their whereabouts* (1963). A second edition is in preparation.

From Phillimore's resignation in 1893 up to 1957 the work of the society was carried out under the direction of a series of individual general editors, such as T. M. Blagg (1910-36) or C. H. Ridge (1940-1957). Since then it has been under the control of an editorial committee, which consists at present of F. G. Emmison, M.B.E., F.S.A., F.R.Hist.S., Marc Fitch, F.S.A., F.R.Hist.S., L. Russell Muirhead, M.A., F.S.A., and the Hon. Guy Strutt, M.A. The present Honorary Secretary of the society is Dr. Peter Spufford of the Department of History at the University of Keele in Staffordshire.