Our national archives:  
The Public Record Office

In October 1977 there was opened to the public the most up-to-date national archive building in the world, housing 3,000 tons of records of modern government departments on 69 miles of shelving; the new Public Record Office at Kew, west of London, beside the River Thames.

The fortress-like headquarters were designed by a team of representatives of all the disciplines involved, under the Directorate of Civil Accommodation of the Property Services Agency, and built by Taylor Woodrow Construction Ltd at a cost of just under £10,000,000. The new building was necessary in order to relieve the overstrain on storage, reading-room and office accommodation of the PRO’s earlier building at Chancery Lane, which now retains medieval records, State papers before 1782, modern legal records and decennial census returns 1841-1871.

The main aims have been the provision of a secure and controlled environment to ensure the continued physical preservation of the public records. All hazards are guarded against; the ground floor is raised in case of flooding, the top three floors almost windowless to reduce deterioration from ultra-violet radiation. Security precautions against human abuse are stringent. The dauntless civilian must obtain a ticket by completing a form and producing means of identification; leave his coat, bag or briefcase at the cloakroom; abandon his acid, non-erasable pen and proceed, armed only with harmless pencil, through a turnstile, to reserve in the reading-room a seat and radio bleeper; master the document reference system of Group and Class, and operate a computer to order up to three documents. (PRO staff are available to assist new readers to find their references and use the computer terminals.) Then he awaits the bleeper’s signal that his documents are ready for him, and sits back to read them in the privacy of the honeycombed reading-room tables, using his book-rest, avoiding leaning on the documents or handling them unnecessarily, under the surveillance throughout of closed-circuit television.

However, the Office has continued to attract large numbers of readers, despite its move from central London, and the average number of documents seen by a reader on each visit has almost doubled.

There are two reading-rooms and one reference room, with typewriters, microfilm readers and copying facilities all available on request and under supervision.

Documents may be inspected 30 years after the date of the last item in them—with listed exceptions. Large documents and all maps are housed separately and ordered from staff, not through the computer. There is a large card index of maps, kept under constant review, and a comparable index of photographs is to be introduced.

The staff of 263 include those trained in the conservation of old documents—a process fascinating to behold; remounting, strengthening or rebinding faded, crumpled, charred or incomplete papers, patching gaps with parchment pieces, facing sometimes with collagen supplied by sausage manufacturers.

Initially there was local opposition to the erection of this building, the citizens of Kew supposing that Big Brother was to come amongst them and maintain records on each. It still seems a strange, defensive structure, towering beside the Thames. We may be sure that, even after 30 years when no longer secrets, our government records are well guarded.

H. K. B.

Reprinted from The Times, 5th October 1978:

One of the more unfortunate erratum slips of the autumn publishing season has just reached my office. 'Please note', Slavika Publishers Inc, of Columbus, Ohio, says, 'that due to an error all page numbers given in the index of Debrezeny and Lekman's Chekhov's art of writing are three too high. If the index says 70 you should read 69; if the index says 188, you should read 185, and so forth. Please put this slip into the book before page 193 (the first page of the index). We regret any inconvenience this may cause you.'

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