

The Public Record Office and its means of reference *

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The Public Record Office (PRO) holds the UK national archives, which go back 900 years. The earliest surviving public record is the Domesday Book of 1086; the latest dates from about 30 years ago. When the records created by government departments and law courts cease to be of current use, they are retired to the PRO where they become valuable historical sources.

The Public Record Office was founded by Act of Parliament in 1838, with the Master of the Rolls as Keeper, and the Deputy Keeper as professional head. The first stage of its Chancery Lane building was commenced in 1851. As deposited records accumulated it became necessary to make rules for disposing of records which had only ephemeral value. The move to the new purpose-built record office at Kew was made in 1977. Recently the Government's proposal to close the Reading Room in Chancery Lane as an economy measure had been announced. The Public Records Act of 1958 repealed earlier Acts and put the PRO under the authority of the Lord Chancellor. It established the statutory post of Keeper of the Public Records and obliged government departments to transfer their records to the PRO. All records were to be open to the public when 50 years old—the period was reduced to 30 years in 1967—although discretion to withhold access remained with the Lord Chancellor. Detailed census returns are subject to 100 years' delay because of their personal sensitivity. The public in fact made around 89,000 visits a year, the most heavily used material being the census returns for the nineteenth century—now copied on to microfilm to avoid excessive handling—much used by genealogists, and modern Foreign Office records.

The PRO employed a total staff of around 450, whose duties included conservation and publication. Calendars of medieval records and some handbooks to modern records had been issued.

Indexes

The history of indexing is epitomized by the PRO. Records appear to have been indexed before books. Walter Stapledon, in the early fourteenth century, made repertories and finding aids for users; Arthur Agarde in the late sixteenth century and Peter Le Neve in the

seventeenth century both made indexes and calendars for Exchequer and common law records; Thomas Palmer in particular indexed patents and inquisitions *post mortem*. Some of their indexes are still used.

The earlier indexes were certainly rather primitive, but strict alphabetical order was in any case difficult to obtain when variant spellings of personal and place names abounded. Early indexes also tended to be selective; for example, Plantagenet Harrison indexed what interested him personally. Publication of indexes started about 1800, when the Record Commission began publishing texts as they stood, together with their indexes. The indexes named only persons and places; no attempt was made to index subjects.

Gradually principles and procedures were developed. R. F. Hunnissett's *Indexing for editors* encodes rules now accepted by the PRO and by archivists generally, regarding, for example, the identification of place names and the use of references from variant spellings. Subject indexing is less regulated since each work has its own subject bias and must be indexed for what it is. Seldom, in fact, are two documents identical in subject matter—one of the reasons why experiments in computer-aided indexing have not led to the abandonment of the system of making manual index entries while making a calendar.

Eighty-five miles of shelving, containing millions of discrete items of information, could not possibly be incorporated into one general index.

Searching

A search may have several stages. The researcher consults first the general *Guide to the contents of the Public Record Office*, first issued in the nineteenth century, revised in the 1920s by Giuseppe, and updated in 1963 and 1969. Since 1969 there have been almost as many accessions as are recorded in the printed *Guide*. For modern departmental records a system called PROSPEC, developed from INSPEC, is used to keep the listing up to date, with an annual printout in upper- and lower-case letters, of which photographic reproductions are kept at the PRO. The guides list records as series or collections, since records must be kept in the series in which they were created, as, for example, within a branch or division of a ministry. Within a class the original arrangement is kept so far as possible. The guide notes the titles of the class, the dates

*Summary of talk given to The Society of Indexers 12 Feb 1980

covered, and the number and nature of pieces. Where necessary further information is given.

At the next stage of a search reference is made to the class list giving details of the contents of each class, supplied by the department from which the records originate and made when the documents are boxed and labelled for deposit in the PRO. In some cases further reference is necessary to finding aids produced contemporaneously with the records. Registers of correspondence, for example, all entered in longhand, go back to the nineteenth century. Admiralty Digests, going back to 1793, were begun in 1812. They index subjects using a decimal notation. A system of calendaring and indexing Foreign Office papers was devised by the Foreign Office Librarian Lewis Hertslet. Indexes to F.O. correspondence were prepared under this system covering the years 1810 to 1906; then a card index, still heavily used, was kept up until 1920, after which the index was printed annually in four volumes.

Discussion

Discussion after the talk revealed a lively interest in the subject. The main question concerned the selection of records for permanent keeping. About five years after a file had been closed it was reviewed to see whether it still had administrative use. Before deposit in the PRO it was reviewed again. The final selection was made by a Departmental Record Officer and his staff in consultation with an Inspecting Officer from the PRO. The review procedure grouped material into three lots: the first for disposal as being of no historical value, as, for example, vehicle-licensing applications; the second, material of obvious historical value, such as *all* cabinet minutes and memoranda; the third, material which needed to be individually considered, such as case files which had become policy files and therefore needed to be preserved. Possibly up to 5% of records were finally kept.

News from China

'As your magazine is a world leading magazine, we cannot delay in furnishing you with this important information.' Addressed thus, how can we refrain from passing on the information?

China official annual report 1980, edited by the Beijing Xin Hua News Agency, is due to be published and distributed by Kingsway International Publications Ltd (Hong Kong) by mid-1981. Six hundred-odd pages will report in English and Chinese, with illustrations and statistics, on events in politics, law, economics, and in military, social and artistic fields. A biographical section and an index are to be included. The cost, before publication US\$30.40, after publication US\$38.

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What authors think of indexes *

The *New Statesman* of 13 June 1980 included an eight-page 'comparative survey of book contracts issued by 60 British publishers' by David Caute, chairman of the Books Committee of the Writers' Guild and literary editor of the *New Statesman*. Investigating—or exposing variations in—the 'standard' contracts, it covered delivery of manuscript, payment for proof corrections, changes to text, jacket design, blurb, royalties, rights (paperback, film, dramatic, American), free copies, frequency of payment . . . nary a word about indexes—who should compile or pay for them, who edit or approve.

The Author, 91 (3) Autumn 1980 includes a six-page survey, 'British publishers: what authors say', based on a questionnaire sent by the Society of Authors, in collaboration with the Writers' Guild, to all its members. 1,760 returned entries covered 253 publishers, leading to a three-page 'Survey chart' and a 'League table' of publishers according to the opinions of their authors. Topics covered in this one were—adherence to contracts, editorial departments and design, foreign and subsidiary rights, promptness, promotion, remaindering. On indexes—nothing.

How sad to think that authors appear to care about indexes no more than do booksellers. Has there been no improvement in attitude since it was written in 1729 of Archdeacon Laurence Echard's *History of England*, 'The drudgery of compiling an Index, was left to one who was thought not unfit for so low an Employment as giving an Alphabetical Epitome of that Volume'?

One and a quarter centuries have passed since it was urged that the publication of any book without an index should be made a statutory offence, with severe penalties for offending *authors* (not publishers!). It was no less a personage than a former Lord Chief Justice and Lord Chancellor who thundered this advice.

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A survey conducted in New York by Ronald Mansbridge of what authors feel about American publishers *did* include a reference to an index; the sad tale of an author whose publisher pressed him to let them compile the index in-house, then charged \$430 for this; and showed it in the account as an advance payment to the author—which would be subject to income tax—instead of as an expense. Authors in New York overall appeared most dissatisfied with their publishers, complaining of crass copy-editing, poor communication, retraction of promises, general inefficiency, and even dishonesty. (Report in *The Times*, 6 March 1980.)

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*Apparently they don't.