

ARCHIVIST OR RECORDS KEEPER?

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The distinction between scholarly archivist and modern records keeper is one that I had not been fully conscious of before I left Australia. However, having just returned from a year abroad, I am now at least aware that in some quarters there is strong feeling on the subject and it is as well to choose one's words with care. The very use of the terms archives or records (a distinction in terms which Mr. Ian Maclean has suggested)⁽¹⁾ can cast a slur from the very beginning.

Looking back over the various repositories which I visited it is interesting to recall how much or how little importance was given to modern records management. I would like to tell you here something about three of the institutions which I saw, viz., the Indian National Archives, the Bundesarchiv in West Germany, and the London County Council.

On my way to Europe in January last year I stopped in New Delhi for a few days and while there spent an interesting afternoon being shown round the National Archives by Mr. Joshi, the Assistant-Director. Here the main concentration is on organising the old records already in their possession.

There appeared to be a frightening quantity of these awaiting attention, folded, dirty, and unsorted and in that climate the enemies of records are many. The documents have to be unfolded, cleaned by forced air over a vacuum, placed in a decontamination chamber, humidified and put between boards until boxed in heavy metal-cornered boxes. The records are arranged in series in date order, most departments still using annual indexes. This means new files are started each year although some departments let files continue through several years, which can be confusing as the file must be entered again at the beginning of each year or it does not get recorded.

There is no organisation by the archives of current records unless a department calls on them for advice. Destruction is entirely in the hands of the department itself and few current accessions are being taken.

Extensive repair work is done and of course Mr. Kathpalia, who is in charge of the repair section, has invented his own hand laminating process. Machine lamination is also used and there is a large scientific section experimenting on papers, inks, etc. Microfilming is done, mainly of newspapers and also of some private items to provide copies for retention. An original notebook of Tagore was being filmed while I was there.

The establishment is geared to the old; and the task still to be done on the unprocessed records already held is considered of primary importance to the exclusion of contemporary record planning.

From India I flew to Germany and during my stay in Bonn went down to Koblenz and spent some time at the Bundesarchiv. Since the division of Germany, Government departments have been scattered in various towns and cities; and Koblenz was chosen as a fairly central site for the archives, which were formed by Act in 1952. Housed in six rented floors of a twelve storey insurance company building, the accommodation, though pleasant to look at, is perhaps not all that could be desired for an archive institution.

After the last war, the records in the old federal archives in Berlin were taken over by the East zone and removed to Potsdam. Access up to August, 1961, was possible; and there was friendly co-operation between archivists of East and West

⁽¹⁾ *Essays in Memory of Sir Hilary Jenkinson*, edited by A. E. J. Hollaender, 1962, p.129.

with meetings, conferences, etc. An inventory of records held in Potsdam has been published, but it is incomplete. Negotiations were going forward for a microfilm exchange between East and West, frame for frame, but this had not eventuated before the clash of 1961; and since that time there has been little co-operation.

Records which had been removed from Germany by the Allies after the war were in the process of being returned to Koblenz but, owing to staff shortages, were banking up awaiting attention.

I was, however, surprised to see the quantity of records held by the archives in Koblenz. They are, as one would expect, mainly modern, which must hurt the feeling for tradition of the scholarly archivist, for German archivists are, I feel, of this type by virtue of their training.

Notwithstanding this, however, they have developed highly organised planning for current records management. A plan for the organisation of departmental files throughout their life cycle from creation to disposal, including a classification scheme, has been worked out. It is proposed that departments⁽²⁾ should adopt this plan and at the present time it is being introduced. The objections raised against such an innovation are, firstly, tradition, and secondly of course the time and staff needed for the re-organisation.

Disposal schedules worked out by government departments in collaboration with archives officers are being implemented. One of the problems at present is the geographical scatter of departments and this makes it difficult to maintain a close personal contact. A decision had recently been made to establish an intermediate repository for little-used current records at Bad Godesberg, a short distance from Bonn. The problems being faced in this respect were similar to our own. Departments were chary of the idea, and gentle persuasion was necessary.

I was shown around the archives by Dr. Wagner, who gave up a good deal of time to make my visit an instructive one. He also took me across the Rhine to a repository they have in the Ehrenbreitstein castle, a spectacular eighteenth century Prussian fortification, where they have a film library and photographic section. Also housed there are tapes of speeches by well-known people and recordings of events.

The German ideal of a dual role of scholarly archivist and modern records keeper is a realistic one. A criticism that was made while I was there was that too much emphasis is still being given to historical archives in the training course, with very little instruction in modern records management. I believe that this is improving but the tradition is hard to break.

From Germany I went to England where, after attending the annual conference of the Society of Archivists in Plymouth, I returned to London. Here I had most fortunately been appointed to a temporary vacancy on the staff of the London County Archives; and I remained in the employ of the London County Council for five months.

The Council was established under the Local Government Act of 1888, but before this, since 1855, some of the services required for London as a whole had been provided by the Metropolitan Board of Works. The new directly-elected Council took over the responsibilities of this Board along with non-judicial functions formerly undertaken by justices of the peace. As time went by other responsibilities were added, such as those of the London School Board (in 1904), the Metropolitan Asylums Board and the Boards of Guardians (in 1929). At the present time (though perhaps not for very much longer if the Act proposing to disband the

⁽²⁾ Behordenschriftgut - Aktenbildung, Aktenverwaltung, Archivierung, by Rudolf Schatz, Boppandam Rhein, Harald Boldt-Verlag, 1961. (Reviewed and foreword translated by H. J. Gibney in *Archives and Manuscripts*, Dec., 1961).

London County Council is implemented) it is responsible for the major local government services throughout the administrative county of London. This consists of twenty-eight metropolitan boroughs in an area of 117 square miles with a population of three and a quarter million people. The council is run along parliamentary lines and the set-up is in some ways comparable with our own State Government administration as I know it in Western Australia.

The library is directly under the control of the Clerk of the Council; and the librarian and archivist, Miss Ida Darlington, is responsible for the Members' Library, the Archives and the modern records organisation. She also has photograph and map sections under her control.

Although the Council itself is relatively young the earliest document in the archives collection dates back to 1290. The archives have been officially declared a manorial and also a parochial repository, and hold early records in both categories. They also have records of bodies which were precursors of the Council and private material relating to the county.

The current records organisation is well under way. There is good co-operation between the departmental records officers and the archivist, and most departments work to disposal schedules. Records assistants who work in the various departmental records sections are the responsibility of the archivist, who trains them and keeps an eye on them generally.

When the time comes for records to be transferred to archival custody they come not to the Archives section, but to the Records Keeper, who is responsible for non-current records of the Council as compared with the county records in the Archives section. This suggests an opposition; but in fact both lots of records are in the same part of County Hall and in many cases the modern records are really a continuation of pre-Council records. With the Archivist in charge of both sections it is a fine distinction.

The physical set-up of the London County Council's departments housed together in County Hall makes it much easier for personal contact between Archivist and department and an integration in the records management. To have the old historical records housed near, and as the pre-cursors and complement of the Council's records, gives a satisfying continuity.

The London County Council cannot be taken as the pattern of all county record offices in England, however. In fact its modern records programme is far advanced in comparison with many others. The problem of modern records has been faced by some, but there are still a number of archivists whose work is with historical records solely, and who do not concern themselves with modern ones. The former is, of course, a far more scholarly pursuit, but the problem of current records is an urgent one and unless brought under control soon will be a much greater and unmanageable one for archivists of the future.

In Dr. Kaye Lamb's presidential address to the Society of Archivists last year⁽³⁾ he said: "Calculating the life expectancy of travel vouchers is not an occupation that appeals to everyone. Many archivists not only find it distasteful, but feel that it is no part of their job. To my mind they are wrong — and very dangerously wrong — in so thinking. Someone must deal with record problems; if the archivist does not take the lead in doing so, someone else must and will . . . If records have changed with the years so have archivists".

⁽³⁾ *Journal of Society of Archivists*, April, 1963.