

## **THE TASMANIAN STATE ARCHIVES:**

### **A note on their prehistory**

by Mary McRae

Having been prompted by an enquiry about the history of the Tasmanian State Archives to put something together, a chance visit by Professor S. J. Butlin has thrown some light on the period perhaps best labelled our “pre-history”.

Professor Butlin recalls working on Tasmanian records in January 1940, when the bulk of the records were housed in what was then still known as the Colonial Secretary’s vault. No-one was employed as a full-time keeper of the records, but Miss A. L. Wayn, formerly of the Chief Secretary’s Department and one-time unofficial keeper of the records, used to come in two mornings per week. How then did Professor Butlin do his research? Each morning he obtained the key to the strong-room door of the vault from a fairly senior officer of the Chief Secretary’s Department, and worked alone, unaided and unattended until he returned the key at the end of his day’s work. Even when Miss Wayn was present, the researcher was some distance away, and effectively without supervision. When the custodian of the key found how limited was the professor’s time in Hobart, he was invited to retain the vault key for the duration of his stay, and given a key to the main door of the building, thus enabling him to work at night. The night watchman was to be instructed that Butlin was authorized to be there, but in two weeks no watchman called. Professor Butlin puts it nicely when he said, “outside was war-time ‘brown-out’, with no street lights, so that I could have driven away truckloads of highly saleable material”.

I have been regaled with stories, largely I suspect hatched by R. M. Hartwell, that the material was unshelved, just piled on the floor. This is gainsaid by Butlin, who confirms that the records were shelved on wooden shelving, the individual series in order but with no obvious relationship between adjoining series. Apart from Miss Wayn’s manuscript card index, there were no guides to the material. Apparently it took until the “Sharman renaissance period” to identify the Colonial Secretary’s Office indexes for what they were. Miss Wayn’s index is still extant, much maligned as it is today. It is recalled with affection by Butlin as invaluable despite its incompleteness, occasional errors, and frequent lack of sources. The sources could often be recalled by Miss Wayn, and she was extremely helpful in being able to supply “out of her head” the location, degree of completeness and method of arrangement of many series — although after a day or two Miss Wayn’s wish to be helpful sometimes became a minor hindrance. Beyond an early stage in learning to find material if her index did not help, what Butlin wanted to do was fossick, browse around and take lucky dips. By fossicking, he located the early file registers, and painfully worked out how to operate them. The volumes were not, then, all there, and this made the “fishing” all the more chancy.

Professor Butlin recalled that there was much concern in those

days about convict records, and that his initial reception was distantly polite until he had established that he was not pursuing skeletons in cupboards. He was later told of the existence of another vault to which no-one was admitted, wherein were housed the convict records. The concern about convict records was brought home to Professor Butlin over morning tea at Government House, when the Governor took some pains to satisfy himself that Butlin was not convict-chasing. This appeared to be the point of the invitation, and the Professor ended his reminiscences with musing as to what might have happened if he had said he was investigating his great-great-grandfather.